

*Perspectives on Educating Children and  
Youth in Highly Mobile and Homeless Situations*

# A Homeless Educator's Sourcebook



**THEO: Texas Homeless Education Office**

Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin

*with funding from*

The U.S. Department of Education,  
The Texas Education Agency, and  
Region 10 Education Service Center

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## **About the Texas Homeless Education Office at the Charles A. Dana Center**

The Texas Homeless Education Office (THEO) is committed to ensuring that all Texas children in homeless situations have the opportunity to enroll in, attend, and succeed at school. To accomplish this goal, the office provides a variety of services to school districts, education service centers, students, parents, caregivers, service providers, shelters, state agencies, advocates, higher education institutions, and other interested parties. THEO is funded by the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act.

THEO is housed at the Charles A. Dana Center, a research unit of the College of Natural Sciences at The University of Texas at Austin. Since the early 1990s the Dana Center has worked to support education leaders and policymakers in strengthening Texas education. Through all its work, the center maintains a consistent focus on providing services for children living in poverty. Today, the Dana Center has a presence in hundreds of Texas school districts and in virtually every county across the state.

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**The Homeless Education Liaisons from the McKinney-Vento-funded Texas Homeless Education Assistance Program grantees during the 2000-2003 funding cycle**

Amarillo Independent School District

Arlington Independent School District

Austin Independent School District

Brownsville Independent School District

Dallas Independent School District

El Paso Independent School District

Ft. Worth Independent School District

Galveston Independent School District

Grand Prairie Independent School District

Greenville Independent School District

Houston Independent School District

Mt. Pleasant Independent School District

North East Independent School District

Northside Independent School District

Plano Independent School District

Region 13 Education Service Center

Region 19 Education Service Center

San Antonio Independent School District

Victoria Independent School District

Weatherford Independent School District



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## INTRODUCTION

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### LET'S EXPLORE HOMELESS EDUCATION!

José, 10, arrived in a Texas border city one day with his parents, straight from Mexico. No one in the family spoke a word of English. Other than the clothes on their backs, they had absolutely nothing. Someone they met on the street guided them to a nearby homeless shelter where, luckily enough, there happened to be some available space. José's father started looking for work—as a bricklayer, a landscaper, a dishwasher, anything. As for his mother, she fretted about José, far from home and living among total strangers. She knew he needed to be in school, but with no money for clothes or books, how could that possibly happen? And how could he even *go* to school without knowing any English?

Even in a situation as hopeless as this one, the local educational agency's (LEA) homeless education liaison found ways to help. Hearing of the family's plight, the school district's liaison visited the immigrant family a few days after they entered the shelter. Right away, she drove José and his mother to the nearest elementary school to register José in the fifth-grade bilingual program. She next took them to the city's free immunization clinic where José received all his required shots. Back at the school, she delivered his immunization records to the school nurse. Then she allowed José and his mother to select shoes, pants, shirts, and underwear from among the donated clothes in a storage room maintained by the homeless education program. She also gave José a backpack fully stocked with the supplies a fifth-grader needs: ruler, glue, paper, binders, notebooks, pencils and pens.

Within ten days of his family's arrival in the United States, José was in a classroom. A school bus picked him up at the shelter every morning and delivered him back there at night. Tutors helped him with homework in the evenings. Within a few short months, José was speaking and reading basic English and making Bs and Cs in his schoolwork. He liked the monthly field trips to pizzerias or to the movies, all arranged by the homeless education program. A dolphin aficionado, he looked forward to the summer program, which often included educational trips to Sea World. In short, despite his family's temporary homelessness—and despite the formidable roadblocks they faced—José was able to enjoy a successful education.

José's story is hardly unique. Indeed, since the late 1980s, Texas educators have reached out to thousands of children experiencing homelessness—not just in the border towns and *colonias* but in every corner of the state. They've learned to deal effectively with issues of enrollment, attendance, transportation, academic support, special programs, and more. In the process, they have amassed a tremendous amount of hard-earned knowledge about how to get these kids into school, how to keep them there, and how to make sure they do well.



*Since the late 1980s, Texas educators have reached out to thousands of children experiencing homelessness—not just in the border towns and colonias but in every corner of the state.*

This sourcebook summarizes that knowledge. We hope that as you read the anecdotes and experiences presented here, you will discover new and effective ways to serve the students experiencing homelessness in your own district. Our hope is that as you discover how these successful practices originated and how they work, you will be inspired to find solutions to your own district's needs.

## About This Sourcebook

If you've picked up this book, chances are you're concerned with the issue of homeless education in your school or district. Perhaps you've been tasked with designing an effective program, or maybe you're new to the world of educating students in homeless situations. Perhaps you've been at it for years and feel ready to expand your know-how. You may be a new homeless liaison, wondering how to proceed. Or maybe you're simply interested in finding out more about these important issues.

Regardless of why you're consulting this sourcebook, you're about to receive an abundance of ideas, examples, and general information that will help you and your colleagues educate these students effectively. In the process, you'll learn from other districts about activities and approaches that work best for them in a variety of situations.

## Chapter-by-chapter overview

Each chapter addresses an important aspect of an effective homeless education program.

- Chapter 1 explores the liaison's role and gives criteria for selecting the right person for the job to ensure that the *homeless liaison* is your single most important point of contact.
- Chapter 2 shows how district staff, parents, and the community at large can build awareness of homelessness and its effect on students.
- Chapter 3 describes the vital areas of *enrollment and attendance*—how to make sure enrollment proceeds as it should, and how to keep the students in school once they're there.
- Chapter 4 gives a variety of techniques for addressing the *transportation* needs of students experiencing homelessness and how to keep *mobility* from undermining even the best-laid educational plans.

- Chapter 5 reveals how to set up effective tutoring and summer programs to help students get the *academic support* they need to succeed in the classroom.
- Chapter 6 shows how to help students in *special situations* that exacerbate the difficulties of being homeless—teen pregnancy, motel living, and domestic violence.
- Chapter 7, discusses how to obtain effective counseling, link students with community-based service providers, and help students deal with the considerable *psychosocial factors* presented by homelessness.

### ***What this book is not***

As you explore this sourcebook, keep in mind that we do not intend it to be a legal manual, an interpretation of the law, or a series of mandates that you must follow. The document is simply a compilation of some of the most effective ways to address the core issues of educating students in homeless situations. It's also an effective introduction to some of the most successful homeless education programs around the state—programs whose experiences can be adapted to fit the needs of *your* district.

## **McKinney-Vento Projects and the Texas Homeless Education Office (THEO)**

The specific practices described in this book came directly from the outstanding projects operating throughout Texas with grant funds provided under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act (see Chapter 1). The general information we provide here is drawn from the knowledge base accumulated over the years by the Texas Homeless Education Office in its ongoing mission to learn how to educate these students effectively.

### ***McKinney-Vento projects***

During the 2002–2003 school year, 18 Texas school districts and two education service centers in Texas were awarded McKinney-Vento grants. These projects served more than 35 independent school districts, several of which have assisted students and their families for over ten years; the majority have done so for at least six.

These projects, often referred to as “McKinney-Vento projects,” have provided indispensable resources that constitute the heart of this guide. Their staff provided generous written descriptions, and many consented to lengthy one-on-one interviews. As a result, we obtained a wealth of examples and information drawn from the real-world experiences of teachers and administrators. Readers interested in educating K–12 students in homeless situations will find these experiences invaluable.

### ***Texas Homeless Education Office (THEO)***

The THEO staff has worked since 1988 to make sure that *any* Texas child experiencing homelessness can enroll, attend, and succeed in Texas public

schools. We closely monitor McKinney-Vento projects and provide a wealth of training and support to districts with and without grants. Through our website—[www.utdanacenter.org/theo](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo)—we offer complete guidelines for homeless education programs as well as information about laws and training sessions. We disseminate a variety of printed materials aimed at enhancing awareness, understanding, and know-how. Finally, we work closely with several state and national organizations—such as the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEH CY), the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE), the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP), the Texas Homeless Network (THN), the Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS), and the Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV)—to develop programs and activities that improve the education of *all* homeless students.

In short, THEO has grown and expanded right along with the districts whose McKinney-Vento projects we help administer. This text marries our accumulated knowledge and concrete experiences. The result is a resource for establishing and enhancing homeless education programs of your own.

### ***A special note to districts without grant funds***

As we will continue to stress throughout this document, Texas school districts have varying levels of need with respect to educating students experiencing homelessness. Many districts—especially smaller ones removed from big cities—have limited homeless populations. Those districts may have little reason to apply for a McKinney-Vento grant and, consequently, do not need to do all the things we describe in this book.

Nevertheless, the 2001 McKinney-Vento legislation mandates that *every* school district in the nation must adhere to all laws in the Act and have a homeless education liaison on staff, a point we will explore further in Chapter 1. *All* districts must be prepared to educate any student experiencing homelessness in need of assistance. For that reason, this sourcebook will be invaluable not just for districts with extensive homeless populations, but for every district in the state. The activities and programs described here can be adapted to fit any set of needs.

Even if your district does not receive McKinney-Vento funds, you can establish effective programs based on the resources at your disposal. You can also use that portion of your district's Title I funds that is earmarked for serving children experiencing homelessness. *Any* LEA, education service center, or open enrollment charter school is qualified to apply for a McKinney-Vento grant.

Region 10 grants these monies on a three-year funding cycle: the funds are renewable every year, based upon performance and the submission of a continuance application, and you needn't reapply until you've been funded for three full years. In 2003-2004, Region 10 will offer some smaller grants to school districts not receiving full McKinney-Vento funding. If you determine that a McKinney-Vento grant would benefit your district, visit our website for all the applicable forms and information.

*Even if your district does not receive McKinney-Vento funds, you can establish effective programs based on the resources at your disposal. You can also use that portion of your district's Title I funds that is earmarked for serving children experiencing homelessness.*

Regardless of whether you have—or are applying for—a McKinney-Vento grant or whether your district's homeless population is large or small, you need to understand the fundamentals of homeless education.

## Homeless Education Fundamentals

### ***McKinney-Vento Act***

The *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Improvements Act of 2001* (known as the McKinney-Vento Act) was a reauthorization of the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, originally passed in 1987. McKinney-Vento introduced a number of core changes and additional requirements that went into effect at the beginning of the 2002–2003 school year. Because the act is so comprehensive in its approach to providing educational services and support to children and youth experiencing homelessness, *it is imperative that every district's administrators have a thorough working knowledge of the McKinney-Vento Act.*

Likewise, district personnel—including administrators, teachers, counselors, secretaries, enrollment clerks, and cafeteria workers—should know and abide by what we call the *three systemic best practices* that represent the foundation for educating students experiencing homelessness:

- Understand your target population.
- Commit to serving the highly mobile poor.
- Know the local, state, and federal laws and rules.

While a detailed discussion of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act is beyond the scope of this work, here are some standout provisions of the legislation:

- The term “homeless” encompasses all people experiencing inadequate living conditions due to loss of housing because of economic hardship. Those in homeless situations typically rely on doubled-up housing arrangements, shelters, motels, cars, parks, abandoned buildings, some migratory situations, and so on.

- All students in these situations are considered eligible for services under the Act.
- Every district *must* have at least one on-staff liaison to manage homeless education.
- Students must be allowed to stay in their *school of origin*, if that is in their best interest.
- Districts have responsibility for transporting students to their school of origin.
- Students must be enrolled immediately and are not required to provide school records, birth certificates, immunization records, or other documentation.

We will delve into the heart of these provisions—and learn how Texas education service centers and school districts have implemented effective solutions—in later chapters of this guide. However, our chief purpose here is to examine homeless education from a vantage point much broader than that of the McKinney-Vento Act alone.

If you have not read the McKinney-Vento Act closely, we strongly encourage you to do so. To view or download a complete text, visit our website at [www.utdanacenter.org/theo](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo) and click on Laws. Especially valuable are fact sheets on individual topics within McKinney-Vento, collaboratively developed by a number of national organizations. You can also access these fact sheets along with summaries of the Act and implementation guides on our website by clicking Resources, then Fact Sheets. Other resources for understanding the McKinney-Vento Act are the the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty ([www.nlchp.org](http://www.nlchp.org)), the National Coalition for the Homeless ([www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org)), and the National Center for Homeless Education ([www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche)).

### ***Systemic best practices***

To guarantee the education of students in homeless situations, you must do more than simply implement the best practices described in this document. You and your district must first establish a foundation on which to build a homeless education program and then foster its growth. Homeless education must be an ongoing priority that is woven tightly into the very fabric of your overall education system. In other words, for *specific* best practices to be effective, you must have in place a set of *systemic* best practices that underlie all your efforts. We have identified three systemic best practices: understand the target population, commit to serving the highly mobile poor, and know the laws and rules. Each of these is detailed in the sections that follow.

### ***Understand the target population***

Before you can serve students in homeless situations, you must know who they are. That requires understanding the nature of family homelessness. First and foremost, you should keep this in mind: *families typically do not experience long-term homelessness*. Most of these families have relatively brief episodes of homelessness, falling in and out of homelessness as circumstances change. These episodes are unpredictable and, most often, temporary.

Second, several factors must converge for a family to be forced to move into a shelter, onto the street, or into a car. While the number of students in one of these situations may be relatively small, the total number of children who've lived in a homeless situation at some point, or who may become homeless again in the future, is much larger.

Your target population, therefore, consists not only of those experiencing homelessness but of the *potentially homeless*—those students who live in situations that are likely to erupt into homelessness. What makes families susceptible to homelessness? Housing instability is, of course, the most predictive factor; another is poverty. A family might be able to rent a place for a while but then, because of unexpected expenses, be forced back out into a shelter or onto the streets. Once established, the cycle often continues.

It is important to think of homeless education as a way to serve *highly mobile poor students*—not just students who may be literally homeless at a particular point in time. Targeting highly mobile poor students and families ensures that those who are currently homeless are able to get an education. Equally important, though, it also provides a way to identify and serve those who are at risk of experiencing homelessness in the future.

### ***Commit to serving the highly mobile poor***

For any homeless education effort to succeed, the system must serve the families. Unfortunately, many schools tend to expect families to accommodate the needs of the system.

Creating a system that serves the highly mobile poor does not happen by accident; it requires deliberate intention. You must make a conscious decision to educate these students, then evaluate whether your current system can meet those needs. To do that, you must learn about the needs of the families you're serving and honestly assess how your system actually works—as opposed to how it *should* work. As you do so, keep this in mind: committing to serve the educational needs of the highly mobile poor will impact your entire school system, from the classroom to the cafeteria, from school bus routes to after-school labs.

### ***Know the laws and rules***

We've talked about how important it is for administrators to thoroughly understand the provisions in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act. However, *everyone* in the district—from administrators and teachers to counselors, cafeteria workers, secretaries, enrollment clerks, and bus drivers—should also have working knowledge of the relevant local, state, and federal laws and rules. States and localities have their own statutes and regulations—specific enrollment and attendance guidelines, for example. Everyone who comes in contact with the students, for any reason, needs to know how his or her role is affected by the laws and rules—and how they can best abide by those regulations.

In short, we intend this sourcebook to be one of your most valued resources in meeting the needs of students like José, whom we met at the beginning of this

introduction. As you will recall, the liaison who helped José responded immediately to the pressing need to get him into school—quickly, efficiently, and with a well-developed process. She provided him with the clothing and supplies he needed to fit comfortably into the classroom, and she obtained the transportation and tutoring services he needed to succeed. We hope the perspectives offered here will enable you to serve your district's own children in the same way.



## CHAPTER 1

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### YOUR LIAISON: THE HEART OF A HOMELESS EDUCATION PROGRAM

Kelley Romar's 21-year career with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice was a rewarding one. First as a parole officer, then as a supervisor of parole officers, she had a clear impact on people's lives. Although most of Kelley's clients were starting from rock bottom, she found satisfaction in helping them round up the resources they needed: job opportunities, housing—all the elements of a new, more productive life. She particularly enjoyed helping parents because children model their behaviors after those of their parents. Working with parents to address their problems and help stop the cycle of crime and ignorance, she believed, was one of the most important parts of her job.

That's why Kelley was so excited when she spied a job posting for a homeless education liaison in the Galveston school district. After two decades in criminal justice, she was ready for a change. She'd been thinking about retirement and was considering teaching school. But the minute she saw the job description, those notions flew right out the window. All she could think was, "That's me. I can be an asset. They need me."

*"It's a blessing to have an opportunity to get with these kids at a young age. We have a chance to keep them from lives of delinquency. The adult patterns I saw in the criminal justice system are ones I hope to prevent with these children."*

***Kelley Romar, Local Education Agency Liaison, Galveston ISD***

So began a new career for Kelley Romar, whose enthusiasm for the job has only deepened since she took it on. From her district's exemplary after-school program to its lineup of summer field trips, from home visits to clothing drives to community outreach and more—the activities that characterize Kelley's job are extremely gratifying. "It's a blessing to have an opportunity to get with these kids at a young age," she says. "We have a chance to keep them from lives of delinquency. The adult patterns I saw in the criminal justice system are ones I hope to prevent with these children."

What does it take to make that kind of an impact? Passion. "For this job, passion is an absolute must. You have to really want to work with these students. As a liaison, you encounter many, many barriers and plenty of frustration," Kelley explains.

“When you’re told no, you have to work around it. You have to constantly gather information and share it effectively. You have to be able to motivate people. That requires total commitment—along with the ability to be very, very innovative.”

That pretty much sums it up—not just for Kelley but for several hundred other LEA liaisons at work in school districts and education service centers across Texas. When Congress reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Act in 2001, it *mandated* the presence of a liaison in every school district nationwide. As districts fill and manage this important position, they’re faced with numerous challenges:

- What, exactly, are the liaison’s roles and responsibilities—with respect to the law and to the district’s unique needs and requirements?
- What kind of person should be placed in the position, and what kind of prior experience should he or she have?
- Should the liaison do double-duty as a teacher, or should he or she be dedicated solely to the liaison role?
- What training is needed?
- Given the district’s homeless population and special needs, can a single person manage all the liaison’s duties as resource developer, counselor, case manager, and more—or will the job require two or more people?

*When Congress reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Act in 2001, it mandated the presence of an LEA liaison in every school district nationwide.*

This chapter explores these issues and presents an in-depth look at what the liaison position entails. You’ll also see how you—as administrator, educator, or liaison—can leverage this critical role most effectively. But first, let’s address a crucial question: Why is the liaison so important?

## **Your #1 Key to Success**

Prior to passage of the McKinney-Vento legislation, school districts were required by law to educate students experiencing homelessness—although they were *not* required to have a liaison on board. Some homeless education projects were effective; others were less so. Again and again research revealed that, despite their differences, the successful programs shared a single common denominator: a homeless education liaison.

Consider this brief sampling of what Texas liaisons have accomplished. Thanks to their remarkable efforts,

- every educator in Mt. Pleasant ISD attends comprehensive presentations on homeless issues;
- in Brownsville, students in the local homeless shelter can enroll in school within a single day's time—regardless of inoculation records, address status, or school records;
- every household in Northside ISD receives program flyers, brochures, and information packets about homeless issues and educational opportunities;
- students experiencing homelessness in the Houston ISD are efficiently and discretely enrolled in the free school lunch program;
- Victoria's KIDZconnection program provides transportation for students in a variety of transitional living situations;
- students in the Brownsville Homeless Youth Connection program spend part of the summer learning about different countries—their cultures, foods, animals, and more—and taking field trips related to the countries they are studying; and
- students in Grand Prairie have their own homework lab—away from the chaos of the homeless shelter—in which to complete their schoolwork.

The list could go on. In fact, we will revisit these endeavors—and many others like them—later in this chapter and throughout this guide. As you will see, it is the liaison who orchestrates opportunities for students in homeless situations, links the children and their families to vital services, and stabilizes students whose lives may be marked by commotion and turmoil. It is the liaison who promotes not just school attendance but academic achievement. The liaison, more than any other single individual in the school district, is in a position to help break the cycle of homelessness.

Diana Clive, Brownsville ISD liaison, puts it this way: “These students need an advocate, and the liaison is that advocate. We can connect—and if we don’t do it, no one else will. We’re the ones who can make a difference.”

*“These students need an advocate, and the liaison is that advocate. We can connect—and if we don’t do it, no one else will. We’re the ones who can make a difference.”*

***Diana Clive, LEA Liaison, Brownsville ISD***

## **Making a Difference: Roles and Responsibilities**

What enables liaisons to have such an impact on so many lives? One factor is the complex array of programs and activities in which they are involved. In this section we provide a high-level overview of the liaison's main roles. You'll discover some of the ways in which individual Texas liaisons have approached these key aspects of the job:

- Understanding the school district and educating personnel about homelessness issues
- Learning about the wider community and knowing which organizations provide services
- Getting involved with a range of service organizations
- Conducting a needs assessment
- Creating and implementing a service plan
- Providing professional development for school and other key personnel
- Educating business and community groups about homelessness and about how they can get involved
- Establishing personal relationships with the students and their parents
- Resolving disputes involving enrollment, transportation, records, and other matters as they arise

Each of these functions will be discussed in much more detail in subsequent chapters of this guide. As you will see, the liaison is a central player in every aspect of a homeless education program.

This section does *not* provide a comprehensive account of what the McKinney-Vento Act requires of the liaison position. However, you can learn about these legal requirements in the *Local Homeless Education Liaison Toolkit*, published in the winter of 2002 as a collaborative effort between the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) and the staff of Project HOPE, the state of Virginia's Program for Educating Homeless Children and Youth. The toolkit succinctly summarizes the Act's provisions regarding the local liaison's role. It also provides a wealth of other equally valuable resources. To obtain this indispensable toolkit, call the NCHE at 800-755-3277, download it through the NCHE website at [www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche), or visit the Texas Homeless Education Office's website at [www.utdanacenter.org/theo](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo).

*Order the **Local Homeless Education Liaison Toolkit** by calling 800-755-3277, download it at [www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche), or visit the Texas Homeless Education Office's website at [www.utdanacenter.org/theo](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo).*

Now, let's take a look at the main duties of the local homeless education liaison.

### ***Understanding and educating the district***

Successful practices have shown that liaisons must know the school district in which they're working: its demographics, enrollment policies and procedures, programs and services, and relationships with other service providers. The best way to obtain that knowledge is by *visiting the schools*. Then, make sure that *every educator in the district* knows about the issues and understands what's required for a successful homeless education program.

### ***Getting acquainted***

Typically, a liaison's school visits include all of the following:

- Meeting the principal, secretary, counselor, teachers, enrollment clerk, attendance officers, bus drivers, and other staff in *all* the district's schools and community sites
- Establishing a positive, personal rapport with these individuals
- Finding out about each locale's strengths and weaknesses, its attitude toward students, its climate and, of course, its enrollment policies and any special programs or services
- Interacting with the students

Brownsville's Diana Clive stresses the importance of these visits—particularly for the new liaison. "When I became a liaison, I spent a lot of time getting to know everybody in the district—in schools, in service centers, and in community sites," she says. "I got to know all the educators, including directors and educational coordinators. It was crucial to get a feel for everything, because each site has its own dynamic."

### ***Raising awareness***

The liaison plays a key role in raising awareness by informing educators about their homeless population, the liaison's role, and the goals of the homeless education program. In Chapter 2 we will look more closely at ways to increase awareness. For now, consider the experience of Mt. Pleasant ISD's liaison, Sarah Poskey, who made a strong and lasting impact through her interactions with the schools.

As she got to know the Mt. Pleasant educators, staff, and students, Sarah gave formal presentations—always making sure to pull in representatives from the domestic violence and family shelters as well as sexual abuse, mental health, and drug abuse counselors. Her detailed and informative presentations and frequent visits to their facilities soon made Sarah's a well-known face around all the district's campuses. The staff came to understand that homeless issues were not simply going to vanish; on the contrary, it became evident that the district would need to provide adequate education for its homeless student population. Sarah was ready to help make that happen.

**Kelley Romar, Galveston ISD LEA**

**Liaison, on community involvement:**

*"The more you already know the district's demographics, policies, and services, the better. That makes it easier to pick up the telephone and call the right people for the right things."*

*"I went around very early on to all the schools and educated personnel on our homeless programs and activities. I also got on a lot of boards—the immunization board of the local Homeless Coalition, the Teen Health Center board that oversees our schools' full-blown clinics, and others. I'm also on the site-based committee at one of the elementary schools, serving as an advisor for educational support personnel. That's important because secretaries and other support staff work closely with our kids and their parents. Finally, I'll soon be an advisor to the group of bus drivers who transport our students—a critical group, because the kids move a lot."*

*"I've made so many presentations at so many meetings. People tend to get excited about the program when they hear what we're doing. When I meet with various groups—such as the school district's counselors, for example—they'll often be members of other organizations as well, and they'll invite me to meet with these other groups. Eventually more and more people get involved, giving donations and contributing in many other ways as well."*

## **Getting to know the community**

A key part of the liaison's job is to identify students experiencing homelessness, connect these students with the schools, and help them obtain a range of other critical services. This directive requires intimate familiarity with the larger community.

The following approaches have proven successful in helping liaisons familiarize themselves with communities in which they are working:

- Get to know the low-income neighborhoods and other areas where people without homes might be.
- Identify areas where young dropouts might congregate during the day.
- Locate all public laundry facilities, campgrounds, food banks, soup kitchens, and shelters.
- Establish relationships with Head Start centers, migrant housing developments, and the managers of public housing complexes.
- Compile a list of daily or weekly low-cost motels.

In addition, a liaison frequently talks with people who operate services in these areas and those who use them. The goal is to locate students experiencing homelessness in the district so that they can be enrolled in school and needed services can be provided.

Diana routinely visits those sections of Brownsville where students experiencing homelessness are likely to be found. "We have six community sites," she says. "We serve students in shelters, in Boys and Girls Clubs, and in a Good Neighbor settlement house in a poverty-ridden area. These are the parts of the city where people most in need tend to live. It's important to visit the sites regularly, both to identify target students and to introduce them and their families to needed services."

*"It's important to visit community sites regularly, both to identify target students and to introduce them and their families to needed services."*

**Diana Clive, LEA Liaison, Brownsville ISD**

## **Connecting with service organizations**

Successful homeless education programs depend on a close network of agencies, churches, businesses, and other organizations that serve their target population. The liaison usually takes responsibility for establishing and maintaining this network.

In districts with successful homeless education programs, not only does the liaison identify and meet with these organizations, he or she is actively involved. The liaison knows exactly where to refer students and families for housing, health care, counseling, employment assistance, childcare, food, clothing, and more. In some cases, the liaison sits on the boards of these organizations or is an active member, volunteer, or advisor. Some liaisons either join or start a homeless coalition in their area. The more involved the liaison, the more effectively the organization serves students and families.

*The more involved the liaison, the more effectively the organization serves students and families.*

### **Conducting a needs assessment**

Before a coherent plan can be established, it is important to know what that plan is meant to accomplish. Successful practices have shown that conducting a needs assessment is a crucial part of the liaison's role. Once an assessment has been conducted, you can develop an effective action plan: What's going to be done, who's going to do it, and when?

This needs assessment can be formal or informal. In either case, it should address a wide variety of factors:

- Who in the district is without a home? Why?
- What are their needs—educationally, emotionally, physically, and mentally?
- What resources are available to help, beyond those resources provided through the McKinney Act?
- What are the service gaps, and how might they be filled?

While the liaison is ultimately responsible for the needs assessment, it might actually be conducted by another staff member in the homeless education program. Such is the case in Galveston ISD, says liaison Kelley Romar, where "the case manager, a vital element of our program, does the needs assessment."

In Galveston's case, the assessment is relatively informal. "The case manager does an initial intake—contacting parents, receiving referrals, visiting the shelters or homes," Kelley says. "She finds out what the needs are. That might include uniforms, school supplies, emergency food, or any number of other things. She'll know where to do placements and what referrals to make."



**Kelley Romar on the Galveston program's summer camp:**

*"We're super-excited about summer camp. Our kids have constant needs all the time, not just during the school year, so we're in touch with them every day between 7:30 and 5:00 all summer long. It's important to maintain our support. Most of the kids tend to be behind in school, so we use the summertime to help them retain their education, make some extra headway, and keep their focus."*

*"We devise a lot of enrichment programs, including TAKS tutorials and workshops to improve their test-taking skills. We also hit the road. This summer our students will go to lots of museums, including N.A.S.A. and the Houston Children's Museum. Hands-on learning is more fun than what you can learn from a book."*

*"Right now, I'm working on getting the community involved. There are a lot of summer programs held at the local community and junior colleges. I'll tap in and try to get our students scholarships. We'll also aim for scholarships at the Y for swimming. We have a recreation objective in our grant, so I'll try to line up a number of these kinds of activities. We'll investigate some of Galveston's many arts and culture venues, along with basketball and cheerleading camps. I want the kids to have fun—not burn out on strictly scholarly activities."*

Brownsville's liaison describes a somewhat more formal approach. "For our needs assessment," Diana says, "we use a tool that comes from the Texas Homeless Education Office. The forms talk about our program and the services we provide. Students, teachers, and directors of community sites, such as the shelters, fill them out. We find out what's needed transportation-wise. We get important feedback about our tutoring service and about special activities such as field trips."

In short, says Diana, "the needs assessment tells us what the needs are. For any district, these assessments are critical for building a program around students' needs, evaluating the program at year's end, and planning for the coming year."

### ***Developing and implementing a service plan***

The service plan is the foundation of your program. Here is where you involve key players from the school, the community, and the homeless population. All of them can provide input into your plan's development, and all have a stake in its success. Derived from your needs assessment, the plan helps ensure that your students and families receive all the educational and social services they require.

Liaisons initiate and oversee service plans that address everything from implementing federal and state laws to professional development for school personnel, awareness activities to enrollment programs, after-school tutorials to field trips, summer programs to speaking engagements. They create brochures and other materials describing district programs. They establish computer labs, conduct home visits, and track down inoculation and school records. They solicit and distribute donations of needed supplies, such as school uniforms, everyday clothes, hygiene supplies, food, and furniture. They also orchestrate the sometimes complex logistics of transporting students to school.

And, as we will see, the services provided by the liaison entail much, much more. Consider, for example, the diverse nature of the Brownsville program: "We provide complete registration assistance," reports liaison Diana Clive. "We handle paperwork with respect to accessing school records, immunization records, and birth certificates. We help them fill out the necessary packets and take their records to health services. If a parent thinks something is wrong with their child, we contact a diagnostician at the campus level and arrange for an evaluation." But, Diana's duties don't stop there. "We gather school supplies, clothing, and shoes. We run after-school tutorial programs and a 'safe haven' for homework, where we also provide tutors and snacks. We have a monthly field trip. We've gone to City Island, the equestrian center, and elsewhere. We supply lunch on these trips."

Developing a service plan as rich and comprehensive as those described here can be challenging. But with patience and determination, your results will be rewarding—for you and for the kids. This guide is chock-full of ideas for exciting, enriching activities. For a liaison, the possibilities are virtually unlimited for meeting the challenge of homeless education.

### ***Providing professional development activities***

When district personnel participate in a homeless education program, it has a much greater chance of success. Everyone—from top administrators to teachers, clerical staff to bus drivers, counselors to other support staff—must be aware of the special needs of these students. And they must be wholly dedicated to serving those students. Liaisons should develop relationships with key school personnel and with local directors of other school programs to ensure that students who are homeless can access all of the district's services as needed.

To achieve these ends, regular professional development is critical. With the right mix of professional development activities and events, you can secure critical buy-in on the part of district educators and staff.

Chapter 2 of this guide delves more deeply into this issue. For now, consider a few examples of how our state's liaisons have creatively and effectively fulfilled this aspect of the liaison's role.

- Austin's Project HELP annually trains registrars and attendance clerks prior to enrollment time, making sure they know the issues and are able to enroll students correctly.
- The Region 19 Education Service Center, which serves four school districts in far West Texas, conducts workshops at regularly scheduled in-service meetings. There they educate school personnel on the homeless program and expedite student enrollment.
- The Dallas ISD liaison created the Sensitivity/Awareness Workshop, which provides staff development to personnel in impacted schools. Not only does the workshop raise educators' sensitivity, but teachers and administrators also learn about effective classroom activities.
- Houston's Project Su Casa "piggybacks" onto staff development meetings arranged by other divisions and conducts workshops on homeless issues. Project staff also attend regular teacher in-service sessions at schools serving large numbers of students experiencing homelessness.

### ***Reaching out to businesses, religious groups, and more***

The wider community is often unaware of the real needs of the homeless population. Stereotypes abound. Furthermore, most people who are not directly involved tend to dramatically underestimate the extent of homelessness in their area. What's worse, they may not know how they can help.

To engage and inform the community, liaisons in successful programs have found it useful to speak regularly to service clubs, religious service organizations, and business associations. These groups tend to have substantial resources, financial and otherwise. They care about their communities and want to learn about the true causes of homelessness and how it impacts students and their families. Most of all, they want to know how they can provide assistance.

**Diana Clive, Brownsville ISD LEA**

**Liaison, on reaching out to the wider community:**

"I'm always lining up speaking engagements. I've spoken informally at a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce, and next year will be presenting to administrators, counselors, and data entry clerks. A friend has suggested that I speak to his club, the Rotary Club. These folks need to increase their awareness; they need to know there are special problems they can help to solve. Many times, the reality just doesn't hit them until someone speaks explicitly about it. They think 'homeless youth' and envision something far different from the actual reality of our students.

"Involving the local university is also important. I'm a former student at the University of Texas in Brownsville, so I know who to call. I hooked up this spring with a dance group at the university, and we took the students to a performance. Everyone wore a Mexican costume, and there was a parade and lots of festivities. The exposure was great for our kids. They got to go to a university. What's more, the Education department donated money—and now they want to do so every year. I'm proud of having set this up."

*Service clubs, religious organizations, and business associations want to understand the impact of homelessness on students and their families. Most of all, they want to know how they can provide assistance.*

Kelley Romar works hand in hand with Galveston's churches to achieve this objective. "The Baptist Ministers' Association runs a shelter," she explains, "and we work closely with them because of that. Rotary clubs and various businesses, such as the American National Insurance Company, are also important—they end up volunteering with our program and providing substantial donations. Even though Galveston is a pretty small city, we have a lot of civic organizations—and these organizations have a great deal to offer."

### ***Establishing relationships with students and parents***

Liaisons emphasize the importance of reaching out to these families in personal, ongoing ways. The benefits are enormous: families who are sought out and connected feel less isolated and more hopeful; they are also more likely to take full advantage of the resources available to them.

The Galveston program is quite successful in this regard. The program's case manager goes to the shelter or home where a family is living, does an initial intake, and establishes what's needed—uniforms, school supplies, emergency food, and so on. She also makes the appropriate referrals. Afterward, she regularly checks in with the family to see how things are going.

At Galveston's Discovery Club, these initial contacts blossom into relationships that bear fruit over time. Children interact for several hours after school every day with tutors, the program liaison, and other program staff. Parents attend parenting classes at the Club and at shelters, and they also accompany their children on regularly scheduled family field trips. "This year," says Kelley Romar, "we went to the Grand Opera House. We've also gone to the rain forest exhibit at Moody Gardens. These family field trips are really fun for the kids and parents alike, and they help cement our relationships with these families."

### ***Resolving disputes***

When it comes to homeless education, problems and disputes are inevitable. Enrollment in particular tends to produce a host of conflicts, as we'll see later in this book. Students and their families are often unaware of their enrollment and school placement rights. Districts are unclear about the laws. Decisions are sometimes made that are not in the students' best interests. And when that happens, disputes are inevitable.

Congress recognized this when it drafted the McKinney-Vento Act, which requires states to establish clear, effective procedures for resolving these disputes. For an excellent overview of the law's specific dispute resolution requirements, download the "Dispute Resolution" fact sheet from the Texas Homeless Education Office website: [www.utdanacenter.org/theo/pdf/DisputeResolution.pdf](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/pdf/DisputeResolution.pdf). Here are a few of the liaison's key responsibilities in this regard:

- Make sure that the district has an established, well-understood dispute resolution process.
- Ensure that the student *stays in school* and receives needed services while the conflict is being resolved.
- Confirm that the school *and* the parents have complete written documentation of any decisions that are made.
- Inform parents in writing of their legal rights, how they can dispute decisions, and the timeline for appeals to the district and/or state.

Often, resolving disputes can be as simple as informing educators of their responsibilities under the law. This has been the experience of the Northeast ISD homeless education project, which is contacted frequently by principals and other executive school staff about enrollment issues. "Often they want to know if they have to enroll a student who's living in another attendance area," says project head Barbara Bading. "I explain the law, which mandates that students can enroll in their school of origin." Similar disputes arise around special education testing, transportation, and academic support. Again, we will explore all these issues more fully in subsequent chapters of this guide.

## Who Should Fill the Liaison's Shoes?

It takes a special person to succeed as a liaison. Here are just a few of the qualities that liaisons in successful homeless education programs share:

- **Experience.** Many, if not most, liaisons have spent years teaching in the district. Diana Clive, for example, was a certified teacher in the Brownsville ISD for ten years—experience that taught her, she says, "how the system works and where the resources are." Others, like long-time parole officer and parole supervisor Kelley Romar, come to the job with equally valuable experience—and the knowledge of how to find resources for people at risk. Some liaisons have been coordinators of other federal programs, which also prepares them to "work the system" successfully.
- **Awareness of the district.** Liaisons typically hit the ground running. So the more they already know about the district—its schools, its service centers, its healthcare resources, and more—the easier it will be for them to get up to speed quickly.
- **Understanding of the community.** Every community has its own culture and its own approach to social and economic issues. The savvy liaison is one who's lived in the district for a while and has an instinctive feel for how to navigate neighborhoods, deal with administrators, and create efficient and productive networks.

**Diana Clive, Brownsville ISD**

***liaison, on some valuable liaison characteristics:***

*"It's extremely important that a liaison be sensitive to the needs of the children and their parents. Liaisons need to be aware of special requirements. I have one child who's in special ed and another who is dyslexic. That has helped me be sensitive to the fact that children's unique problems require a unique approach."*

*"Empathy is absolutely critical. It's a lot of work to maintain an understanding of our students' situation. I experienced a little of what that means when I was separated from my husband, and my kids and I had to go live with my mom. Having had that financial burden helps me understand our students' situation. Their experience hits home. I'll think, 'I've been through that.'"*

*"It also helps that when I was a child, we were migrant workers. We were never taken out of school, but we did spend summers picking produce. During the school year my mom was a cafeteria worker, and my dad did odd jobs. Our hardships were a huge learning experience, one that helps me now to relate to our students and parents. Experiences like mine aren't a requirement, of course, but they do help build the kind of empathy that's needed to be an effective liaison."*

- **Communication skills.** One-on-one meetings, presentations, and ad hoc workshops are integral to the liaison's job. As we've seen, effective communication contributes to the success of a homeless education program. A liaison should be able to articulate, often on the fly, the important issues. He or she should also be able to persuade many different kinds of people that their support and involvement are critical.
- **Energy and creativity.** As we've seen, the LEA liaison holds one of the most demanding jobs in education today. The position requires imagination, a never-take-no-for-an-answer attitude, the willingness to persist against sometimes daunting odds, and the ability to fly by the seat of one's pants. Liaisons often create effective programs out of nothing, making the most of meager resources.
- **Commitment.** Finally, and most importantly, effective liaisons are utterly committed to fighting the soul-crushing effects of homelessness on children and youth. The job requires a determination to show students that, despite their current circumstances, they have options that can lead them to lives of stability, productivity, and achievement. As Kelley Romar puts it, "We can ensure they have *all* the services any normal child would have. We have to make sure they stay in school, and that they get the right education. It's up to us to help them finish their educations—the most important task there is."

## FAQs

This section addresses questions we're regularly asked regarding the liaison's role. We hope you find these questions and answers helpful. We also encourage you to contact the Texas Homeless Education Office at 800-446-3142 or at [www.utdanacenter.org/theo](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo) with any questions that might arise.

**Question:** What kind of training does a liaison need?

**Answer:** The McKinney-Vento Act mandates no specific training requirement. However, effective liaisons are trained thoroughly for their jobs. The Texas Homeless Education Office (THEO) conducts liaison trainings for McKinney-Vento-funded projects every summer and routinely visits these districts to provide one-on-one onsite guidance. Many schools, districts, and education service centers request training, which THEO provides free of charge to LEAs.

The Texas Homeless Education Office also offers abundant training materials at its website: [www.utdanacenter.org/theo/toolkits.html](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/toolkits.html). These materials, geared toward liaisons, school personnel, and service providers, include the *Homeless Liaison Toolkit*, the *Pieces of the Puzzle* manual, and PowerPoint presentations on homelessness and the McKinney-Vento legislation.

THEO joins with sister organizations in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi each Spring to coordinate a training retreat for liaisons. The retreat location rotates among the partner states and has evolved into a much-anticipated and extremely valuable event for liaisons. At one retreat, for example,

we were fortunate to be joined by senior representatives from the U.S. Department of Education, the National Coalition for the Homeless, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, and the Texas Homeless Network. We also conduct ongoing trainings across the state and at conferences, such as the Texas Homeless Network conference. For a current training schedule with locations, check out our website.

**Question:** Should liaisons do double-duty as teachers, or should they be devoted full-time to the liaison role?

**Answer:** As you may have guessed, given the discussions in this chapter, the ideal situation—especially in districts having extensive homeless populations—is for the liaison to be devoted full-time to this important role. At the same time, serving double-duty in the classroom is unavoidable in many districts, particularly those having limited resources and/or small homeless populations. Districts must consider all these factors—and make trade-offs where necessary—as they assign personnel and allocate resources to their homeless programs.

**Question:** Is a single person sufficient for the job, or are multiple staff members required?

**Answer:** In districts having extensive homeless populations, the liaison's role is so demanding that additional staff members are often required. Estella Garza, the senior liaison in San Antonio ISD, for example, supervises a staff of three onsite liaisons. Connie Thompson in Houston does the same. In Victoria, the Homeless Education program director, Gail Brocklebank, manages a staff of two, one of them a counselor. Many other districts function perfectly well with only one liaison on staff. Each district must consider its unique needs and allocate staff resources as required to meet those needs.

**Question:** How can a district *without* a McKinney-Vento grant manage the liaison position?

**Answer:** The activities we describe in this chapter—indeed, throughout this guide—are carried out in districts that have applied for, and received, grant funds for their homeless education programs. Not all districts have these funds, nor do all districts have the same degree of need with respect to homeless education. Likewise, many districts will simply not be able to fund an office devoted to these programs; many will be unable to devote an employee full-time to the liaison position, however optimal that may be. It is our hope that those districts can take the examples in this guide and adapt them as needed to their own situations. They will likely not be able to accomplish everything we describe or provide services at the level made possible with a grant. At the same time, they can use many of the strategies—staff development, community outreach, basic needs assessment and planning, and so on—with great success.



What's more, LEAs can often use a portion of their Title I funds to fund their homeless education staff and activities. Students experiencing homelessness qualify for these funds, which are targeted to children living in underserved and high-poverty populations. Not only can districts use Title I to partially fund their homeless education programs, they can also use State Compensatory Education funds for certain activities. Remember: the Texas Homeless Education Office is available to help you plan, organize, and implement programs that make sense for your district, based on what your budget allows.



## CHAPTER 1

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### YOUR LIAISON:

#### THE HEART OF A HOMELESS EDUCATION PROGRAM

**The McKinney-Vento Act of 2001 mandated the implementation of an LEA liaison in every district nationwide. With this mandate, Congress recognized the crucial role of the liaison for homeless education.**

#### **The legal requirements for homeless education:**

- You can obtain a copy of the Local Homeless Education Liaison Toolkit either by calling the National Center for Homeless Education at 800-755-3277 or by downloading it at the website of the Texas Homeless Education Office: [www.utdanacenter.org/theo](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo).

#### **The liaison's key responsibilities:**

- Understand and educate the district in which you are working.
- Assess the needs of your homeless population.
- Devise a service plan to address those needs. Be creative—the possibilities are virtually unlimited!
- Provide professional development for the district staff.
- Reach out to businesses, religious groups, and more.
- Consider joining or forming a homeless coalition.
- Establish relationships with the students and their parents.
- Resolve all disputes as they arise.

#### **Liaison qualifications:**

- Experience—as a social worker, a teacher, a federal program coordinator, or a counselor
- Knowledge of the district
- Understanding of the community—especially its social services network
- Great communication skills
- Energy and creativity
- Most important: commitment

**Available training and resources:**

- Yearly training from the Texas Homeless Education Office (THEO) for grant-funded districts
- Training sessions for all other districts and education service centers by THEO upon request
- Annual training by THEO at several locations across the state
- The manual *Pieces of the Puzzle: Creating Success for Students in Homeless Situations* (available on the THEO website “Resources” page at [www.utdanacenter.org/theo](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo))
- The *Imagine the Possibilities sourcebook* (available from WestEd at [www.WestEd.org](http://www.WestEd.org))

**The ideal:** A staff member with sufficient time dedicated to the liaison role and, when needed, multiple staff in the homeless education project.

If you don’t have McKinney-Vento grant funds . . .

Adapt the relevant suggestions in this guide to meet your district’s unique needs.

## CHAPTER 2

### RAISING AWARENESS: THE FIRST STEP

What's it like for a child to live in a homeless shelter or doubled-up with another family in a motel room? What are the emotional repercussions? What's the impact on the child's classroom behavior? How might a teacher help?

Today's teachers and administrators must explore questions such as these. The Dallas ISD does just that at their Sensitivity/Awareness Workshop—created and hosted by the district's Homeless Education Program. The workshop starts by defining homelessness and introducing the key issues. Then the educators receive a glimpse into how shelter life affects children. They learn about homeless education laws. They discover what resources are available from the homeless education program. Best of all, they're given a range of specific tools and tactics for working effectively with children in crisis. They learn to give students choices, help them manage their anger, ensure that they have supplies, and find ways to help them feel welcome in a strange classroom.

The Sensitivity/Awareness Workshop is a great example of the type of *awareness-raising* activity that is critical to the success of any homeless education effort. Indeed, the homeless education literature repeatedly stresses the importance of raising awareness among educators, parents, and the community at large. People who are not directly involved with homeless projects have difficulty understanding not only what homelessness *is*, but also how its effects can be overcome in the schools.

Consider, for example, the experience of Sandy Lawrence, who oversees homeless education efforts in Central Texas' Region 13 Education Service Center. "I was at a meeting of curriculum people, Title I folks, and other educators," says Sandy. "One of my goals was to get across a working definition of homelessness. Again and again they said, 'Oh my goodness—that's considered homeless?' Getting people to understand homelessness is a huge challenge."

*"I was at a meeting of curriculum people, Title I folks, and other educators. . . . Again and again they said, 'Oh my goodness—that's considered homeless?' Getting people to understand homelessness is a huge challenge."*

***Sandy Lawrence, Homeless Program Director,  
Region 13 Education Service Center***

What are some effective ways to tackle this challenge? That's the question we address in this chapter. Here you will learn what practices have worked in raising awareness about homelessness, such as

**Feast or Famine,  
Death by Chocolate:  
A Standing-Room-Only  
Awareness Workshop**

**Sandy Lawrence, Homeless  
Program, Region 13 Education  
Service Center, on a special  
workshop presentation:**

*"Every year I do a presentation at the educational secretaries conference held in Austin in June. At first I'd just have one or two people, but last year the room was packed. Several always say, 'I'm coming back next year!'"*

*"One particularly powerful workshop is dubbed Feast or Famine. We have about 30 different scenarios lined out. Everyone is assigned a scenario when they walk in the door, and they have to act out their assigned scenario for the duration of the workshop. Some are homeless; some are middle-class; others are rich people. We have three restaurants set up. The rich folks get to go to a fancy restaurant and be waited on. The middle-class participants have a pizza place. The homeless go to a soup kitchen, where they're told it's closed; there's no food. Some of them have scenarios where they say, 'Can't you give me anything? We have hungry and crying kids here.' They're told to walk four or five blocks down the street to see if the next soup kitchen is open. There, the person manning the door says, 'If I open the door I'll get fired for letting you get water. You can stand in line for three hours and wait for supper.' It is extremely powerful."*

*(continued on next page)*

- how staff development meetings—events such as Dallas ISD's Sensitivity/Awareness Workshop—go a long way toward educating teachers and school personnel about the complexities of homelessness and homeless education;
- why it's important to raise the awareness of parents, who may not know what services are available for their children; and
- how you can use documents, newsletters, brochures, and other materials to raise awareness throughout your district.

First, let's take a closer look at what we mean by "awareness."

## The Three Categories of Awareness

Raising awareness about homelessness is a complex and multifaceted task. Effective homeless education programs address the issue on three distinct fronts:

- **Awareness of homelessness.** People need to know, first and foremost, that homelessness exists in their district. They also need to be aware of the scope and effects of the problem. Essentially, you have to address what it's like to be homeless and how it affects students.
- **Awareness of the laws and rules regarding homelessness.** At any given time, a host of federal, state, and local laws address students who are homeless. What's more, while many laws and rules might not explicitly mention students experiencing homelessness, they may affect these students. Enrollment laws and regulations are a good example.
- **Awareness of services for the homeless.** Schools and districts often provide services to help students and families who are homeless, as does the community itself. Educators, parents, and all other citizens need to be made aware of these services.

Many efforts to raise awareness—staff development, in particular—advance all three types of awareness at the same time; others may focus in on one or two of them, depending on the audience and purpose. The following vignettes and examples describe awareness-raising activities in districts across the state.

## Educating the Educators: Staff Development

Of all awareness-raising efforts, staff development has proven to be one of the most critical. In schools tasked with educating students in homeless situations—and most schools have some of these students—staff development events should be conducted on a regular basis.

Raising staff awareness is an ongoing task. New teachers and administrators come on board all the time. Likewise, legislators pass new laws and change old ones regularly. The homelessness picture in a given district shifts with the economy, with housing availability, and with a host of other factors. The services offered in a community change from year to year, often from month to month. It is important to stay on top of this ever-shifting panorama.

The following sections address two successful approaches to raising staff awareness: creating and conducting staff development awareness meetings and presenting at other staff development meetings.

### ***The staff development awareness meeting***

Many service centers, districts, and schools hold regular staff development meetings devoted to homelessness issues, usually at the beginning of the school year and frequently at other key times as well. One workshop is the Dallas ISD Sensitivity/Awareness Workshop, described at the start of this chapter.

Another example is Austin ISD's Project HELP, which also conducts staff development awareness events. "We train registrars and attendance clerks prior to enrollment time," says Project HELP's Cathy Requejo. "We've set up formal trainings away from their site, and we've found that people *want* desperately to be trained. They don't realize what they need to know, but they do know they need training. A lot of districts fail to train people properly for the positions they're in, and it's scary. It's up to us to fill in the gaps.

"We explain the laws and describe Project HELP, giving them a sense of the kinds of services we're available to provide," Cathy continues. "We introduce them to the full range of enrollment issues, student residency requirements, and more. We believe a key issue is the need to strengthen communication with campus personnel, and these workshops are central to that goal."

*"A lot of districts fail to train people properly for the positions they're in, and it's scary. It's up to us to fill in the gaps."*

***Cathy Requejo, Project HELP, Austin ISD***

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*"We also conduct a 'Death by Chocolate' workshop for the secretaries. The rich ones get fancy chocolate on a silver tray. The middle-class people get Snickers® bars at a convenience-type store we've set up. The poor people, once again, go to a soup kitchen. One of our rules is that the rich and middle-class people cannot give food away. People are actually crying. Once again, this is very powerful, particularly for folks not familiar with the plight of homeless families. Both these exercises really drive home to people the reality of what it's like to be poor and homeless."*

### ***Presenting at other divisions' meetings***

One of the biggest challenges is to ensure that you reach *everyone* who plays a part in homeless education. Schools and districts are big, complex institutions. Sometimes it's difficult—if not impossible—to schedule dedicated homeless education trainings that will reach everybody who needs them.

For that reason, homeless education program staff members must often seek affiliations that guarantee large audiences, such as securing a spot on the agendas of another group's event. Houston ISD's Project Su Casa program uses this strategy successfully at the start of each school year, attending districtwide meetings with those in key positions to foster change.

**Bringing it all together:**

**Region 19 Education Service Center**

*For an instructive glance into how one homeless education program integrated all the awareness-raising best practices discussed in this chapter, consider the activities of far west Texas' Region 19 Education Service Center. Rose Tarin of Region 19 ESC recalls how their efforts took shape:*

*"When the McKinney-Vento program began, we arranged to meet one-on-one with each school district superintendent. Prior to the scheduled meeting we prepared a packet that included statistics on the district's homeless student population; the number of shelters and colonias in their district; information on the McKinney-Vento program; the services we offered; current barriers; and ideas of how some of those barriers might be removed.*

*"Initially we found that the superintendents were not aware of how the law defines homelessness. We explained that because the majority of the students residing in colonias were residing in inadequate living conditions or doubled up with other families, they qualified for services under the McKinney program. We also suggested the following remedies:*

- *Conduct a McKinney-Vento awareness workshop at regular in-service meetings.*
- *Provide shelter tours to the public school teachers.*
- *Coordinate parental workshops with school counselors and social workers.*
- *Expedite the referral process for speech therapy/Early Childhood Intervention or Child Find services for homeless students so that they can receive the services before they move to another school or school district.*

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*Homeless education program staff members must often seek affiliations that guarantee large audiences, such as securing a spot on the agendas of another group's event.*

"The Project Su Casa staff meets with everyone from superintendents to principals, teachers to guidance counselors, social workers to registrars—as well as with nurses, data clerks, enrollment clerks, and administrators and bus drivers in the transportation department," says Marsha Jones, social worker and Project Su Casa coordinator. "What's more, Project Su Casa social workers attend teacher in-services at various schools, particularly those that serve lots of students in homeless situations. Primarily we talk about Project Su Casa services and the laws governing the students. The meetings serve an additional purpose as well, and a very important one: they help us establish relationships with key staff who encounter the students on a daily basis."

Arlington ISD is another district that "piggybacks" effectively. "We try to be involved in as many meetings as we can within the district and in the community," says Betsy Foreman, Arlington ISD liaison. "We go to counselor meetings, principal meetings, events involving data clerks, and meetings of the local homeless coalition. These gatherings are crucial for keeping the school staff abreast of homelessness issues—and for helping us stay abreast of services available in the community."

Finally, ad hoc get-togethers with key educators in the district often serve an important role in raising awareness. San Antonio ISD's Estella Garza, for example, meets as frequently as possible with principals in the district's schools. "The most important thing to tell the principals," says Estella, "is that if students are homeless or doubled-up, here's what has to happen, according to the law. I also let them know we're available to help with uniforms, school supplies, and anything else they need."

### ***Incorporating a shelter tour***

Staff development workshops often include taking participants on a tour of the local homeless shelters. Usually few, if any, of the educators will have actually visited a shelter. The experience can be eye-opening, to say the least.

The Region 19 Education Service Center conducts yearly shelter tours as part of an awareness training for elementary school teachers. This homeless education program serves four school districts in far West Texas, near El Paso, on the border of Texas and Mexico. This large, sparsely populated area contains several *colonias*, which are unincorporated villages that lack running water and electricity. "The shelter tour has become a core awareness-raising activity for us," says Rose Tarin, the Region 19 ESC homeless education liaison. "Prior to these tours, some of the public school teachers would assign our students homework that required viewing special TV programs or performing some other task that was impossible for the students. Once they become aware of these kids' shelter environments and living conditions, they're much more sensitive."



## Educating Parents: Closing the Loop

Parents of students experiencing homelessness are often anxious and confused about what’s happening to them and their families. They’re unsure how to enroll their children in school; they don’t know the laws; and they’re unaware of services that are available to help. Communicating with them can make a tremendous difference—emotionally, logistically, and practically. In this instance, as in many others, knowledge is power. Who ultimately benefits most? The children do.

That’s why, for many of our state’s districts, raising parental awareness is a high priority. Austin’s Project HELP, for instance, includes homeless parents in the information sessions conducted for school staff and local service providers. The sessions prepare parents to enroll their children in school and inform them about much-needed services.

*Communicating with parents can make a tremendous difference—emotionally, logistically, and practically. Who ultimately benefits most? The children do.*

San Antonio ISD also makes a point of educating parents. “We inform them of their children’s educational rights,” says Estella Garza, “and this creates a way for them to speak up for themselves. Plus, we support the process of integrating homeless families with all the other families in the schools—so we link our parents up with the schools, which enables them to be involved.”

The Region 13 Education Service Center provides yet another example of how raising parents’ awareness can make a big difference for the children. “We conduct parenting classes at one of our elementary schools,” says Sandy Lawrence. “One hour a week for ten weeks, the parents come in and learn about how to study with their children. We also talk about discipline and child development.” By preparing the parents to participate more fully in their children’s education, the service center creates a richer, more successful experience for these families.

## Documents and Other Materials: A Crucial Element

Printed materials are key to any successful awareness-raising effort. These materials can contain explanations of the law, enrollment procedures, referral information, program overviews, information packets, and sample forms.

What are the benefits of maintaining and handing out such documents?

- People like to get takeaways they can refer to after attending awareness sessions. They need something tangible that will remind them of what they’ve learned.
- District personnel need information they can distribute to their coworkers and—more importantly—to students and parents.
- Creating and distributing materials provides a way to forge and maintain

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- Allow our homeless program teaching staff (certified teachers) to meet periodically with the public school teacher to discuss homeless students’ academic performance.

*“At the end of this initial visit, the superintendents gave us contact names so that we could begin arranging for some of these services.*

*“Soon after, we began an awareness campaign to promote the homeless program and services. A local brochure was designed and translated into Spanish, describing programs for homeless students and listing other available services. The brochure was distributed at receiving public schools, community social service agencies, and coalition member agencies, and it was also given to homeless parents during the enrollment process. The feedback received from the schools was very positive. One school district, San Elizario ISD, was so willing to assist our program that they provided us with a portable classroom our teaching staff could use for after-school tutoring sessions.*

*“In addition to distributing the brochure, we began conducting workshops to provide the schools with information on the program. This time around, we—joined by the shelter director—focused more on how school district personnel might expedite the enrollment of homeless students. Some of the workshops were conducted during scheduled in-service meetings already set up by the school district. When this was not possible, we arranged to meet individually with each school to discuss enrollment specifics.”*



a network of informal contacts; supplying everyone with documents necessitates repeated interactions, which in turn enhance awareness.

- An information packet functions as an instant introduction to new staff, parents, and students.

*An information packet functions as an instant introduction to new staff, parents, and students.*

Northside ISD is one district that very effectively maintains and hands out materials. As part of a comprehensive outreach effort, the Northside homeless education program widely distributes program flyers, brochures, and information packets. Moreover, the program inserts printed information in the quarterly class schedule of the district's Adult and Community Education Department; this schedule is distributed to every household district-wide. The information also finds its way into the local United Way Community Assistance Directory.

Here are some ways that documents and other materials help raise awareness around the state:

- Every educator in the San Antonio ISD receives a 15-chapter manual providing, among other things, PowerPoint slides that explain the main points of the homeless education law.
- The Region 19 Education Service Center creates and distributes a calendar every year. Each month's page shows a picture of children being tutored or enjoying field trips, along with a statistic about homelessness—for example, "Did you know that single women make up 40 percent of the homeless population?"
- The Region 19 ESC also publishes a regular newsletter containing information about what's happening in El Paso, the surrounding areas, and statewide. One newsletter focused on pertinent changes brought about by the McKinney-Vento Act.
- Austin's Project HELP distributes paperwork district-wide that explains the project and its programs; also included is a memo signed by a deputy superintendent reminding educators that they must abide by the laws.
- At the beginning of each school year, Project HELP creates a flyer listing its services.
- Brownsville ISD designs, prints, and distributes a brochure that lists the homeless program's services and provides contact names and numbers.

## CHAPTER 2

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### RAISING AWARENESS:

#### THE FIRST STEP

**Raising awareness is critical to the success of a homeless education program.**

Most people who are not directly involved in homeless issues do not understand what homelessness is—much less how its effects can be overcome in the schools.

**Foster these three kinds of awareness:**

- Awareness of homelessness—what it’s like and how it affects students
- Awareness of the laws and rules
- Awareness of services for the homeless—in the schools and in the wider community

**Staff development is key! Successful districts have raised the awareness of their educators by**

- conducting staff development events dedicated to homeless issues;
- “piggybacking” on other departments’ meetings, grabbing slots on their agendas; and
- providing shelter tours—an eye-opening experience for most educators.

**Educating the parents:**

- Provide access to information: enrollment procedures, available services, legal rights.
- Enable them to participate more fully in their children’s education.

**Creating and distributing printed materials:**

- Brochures, explanations of the law, enrollment procedures, program overviews, sample forms, etc.
- Benefits: takeaways, staff education, an expanded network of contacts



## CHAPTER 3

### ENROLLMENT AND ATTENDANCE: GETTING THEM THERE, KEEPING THEM THERE

As awareness is raised throughout the district, among the families, and in the wider community, you should become familiar with the issues and laws regarding *enrollment and attendance*.

*“But this kid will only be here a few days!”*

*“He’s hell on wheels—way too disruptive.”*

*“We can’t take her—she’s from an alternative education program.”*

*“Hey—he’s constantly absent. He’ll screw up our TAKS scores and ADA numbers.”*

*“He can go back to the other school, but not here.”*

*“She’ll only drop out, and I’ll end up with another drop-out statistic.”*

*“Nope—no shot records, no school records, no can do.”*

If these remarks strike you as familiar, then you’re not alone. Many schools in Texas—indeed, across the country—have been notoriously resistant to enrolling students in homeless situations. Often, the students do have a history of poor school performance or disruptive classroom behavior. Constantly on the move, many enter and leave districts at unpredictable times. Families often lack access to school records, immunization records, and other needed documentation. Doubled-up families frequently hesitate to give their address for fear of eviction. And those are just some of the many enrollment obstacles that face these students.

What’s more, the difficulties don’t stop with enrollment. Once they’re actually in the classroom, students often lack sufficient nutrition to perform adequately. They seldom can afford basic supplies, such as pencils, papers, books, and school uniforms. For any homeless education effort to succeed, *all* of these enrollment and attendance issues must be addressed.

This chapter looks at successful homeless education programs and how staff members have helped enroll students living in homeless situations and support them once they’re attending class. We’ll give examples of ways to help students get the food and supplies they need to perform effectively. We will also explore three issues that are of special concern with respect to enrollment and attendance: proof of residency and guardianship, the need to enroll school-age children who are living in shelters and motels and not attending school, and how to address schools’ concerns about losing their average daily attendance (ADA).

In addition to the information in this chapter, enrollment-related resources are available on the Texas Homeless Education Office’s website: [www.utdanacenter.org/theo/enrollmentaids.html](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/enrollmentaids.html). Among these resources are *Great Beginnings*, a 20-minute streaming video that describes the enrollment process for students in homeless situations. This outstanding video was developed in 2002 by the

## Identifying Target Students: The Student Residency Questionnaire

*Before helping students in homeless situations receive the services they're entitled to—including a smooth, problem-free enrollment—it is necessary to identify who they are. Barbara Bading of Northeast ISD, Estella Garza of San Antonio ISD, and Marta Martinez of Northside ISD worked together to create a great way to do just that for the San Antonio area: the Student Residency Questionnaire (SRQ), which has now been adopted and revised by many other districts throughout the state. Estella explains:*

*"From the time we got the discussion started and the initial form created, the Student Residency Questionnaire just took fire. It took six weeks to put together, as part of an effort to comply with requirements of the Public Education Information Management System, or PEIMS, a state-wide system used by the districts to feed information to the Texas Education Agency. Every campus is told to give the SRQ to every student upon registration. The questionnaire asks a series of probing questions that help us identify who might be homeless. By sorting the data, we can find those who are doubled-up or otherwise in a situation where they didn't necessarily want to say, 'I'm homeless.' We can find everyone who's living in shelters and motels as well. We train campus personnel to look at the forms and sort out the ones to send us. Out of the 200 SRQs we might get in one day, we*

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homeless education program of the Region 13 Education Service Center in collaboration with several surrounding school districts.

## Enrollment: The Top Requirement for Education

We've seen how difficult it can be to enroll students living in homeless situations. Fortunately, though, the law helps. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act completely protects the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness—whether they are doubled-up, living in a shelter, lacking school and immunization records, in need of special services, or have some other issue. When a school refuses—for *any* reason—to enroll a student experiencing homelessness, homeless education staff are within their rights to say, as did Estella Garza of the San Antonio ISD, "This student meets the legal definition of homelessness, and you're *required* to enroll him." For a complete overview of the McKinney-Vento legislation, visit the THEO website at [www.utdanacenter.org/theo/laws.html](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/laws.html).

*When a school refuses to enroll a student experiencing homelessness, homeless education staff are within their rights to say, "This student meets the legal definition of homelessness, and you're required to enroll him."*

At the same time, the law alone is not enough. It is only one part of the equation. The other part is a commitment—by liaisons, other homeless advocates, and the schools themselves—to work proactively and aggressively toward uninterrupted school attendance for these students. Particularly in districts having shelters or high-poverty pockets in their attendance zones, it is crucial that everyone do what they can to ensure that students enroll in school and attend regularly.

In the sections that follow, we'll explore common enrollment issues, including

- why the role of LEA liaison is crucial for enrollment;
- how to work effectively with shelters and other service providers to facilitate enrollment; and
- how to navigate the big enrollment roadblocks, such as guardianship, residency, health and school records, and performance assessments

### ***The liaison: your enrollment point person***

In Chapter 1, we examined in some detail the role of each district's LEA liaison in ensuring an adequate education for students in homeless situations. The liaison's participation is particularly critical when it comes to enrollment. This vital staff member

- addresses the unique problems that arise with a particular student;

- gives districts a single contact for resolving problems or answering questions;
- compiles and distributes enrollment-related materials, including overviews of the relevant laws;
- works with families to gather records and otherwise complete any background work needed for enrollment; and
- serves as an essential point of contact between students and service providers, such as clinics, social service agencies, and transportation providers.

Austin ISD's Project HELP exemplifies the importance of the liaison's contribution at enrollment time. "We have a weekly physical presence in the shelters," says liaison Cathy Requejo. "We give the parents information on how to deal with the laws as they enroll their children. We also assess what any enrollment needs may be at any given time."

*The liaison serves as an essential point of contact between students and service providers, such as clinics, social service agencies, and transportation providers.*

What's more, says Cathy, the Project HELP liaison calls schools just before the students are slated to arrive. "This gives school personnel a chance to ask any questions," she says. "We're also able to encourage confidentiality with respect to the enrollment process; families are not hindered by their fears of having to explain they're homeless, and school personnel are more sensitive to the needs of the students."

Houston's Project Su Casa also illustrates the liaison's importance with respect to enrollment. To minimize enrollment difficulties, the Project Su Casa liaison distributes copies of relevant laws and other information to principals, data clerks, registrars, and nurses, emphasizing the fact that the lack of a permanent address or immunization records must not stand in the way of a student's enrollment. The liaison also assists in the transfer of those records, particularly for students in special education.

### ***Easing enrollment via shelters and other providers***

When identifying and enrolling students experiencing homelessness, it is critical to develop ongoing relationships with shelters and other service providers. These providers are invaluable sources of referrals as well as touchstones for finding and helping large numbers of students.

Districts with successful homeless education programs recommend the following guidelines for working closely with the shelters:

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*can run as high as an 80 percent homeless rate. By determining who is homeless, the SRQ alleviates a lot of the workload on our end and gives us an opportunity to align with federal law. It also gives the students an opportunity to come into the school district and learn."*

*Note: Generic versions of the SRQ are available on the website of the Texas Homeless Education Office: [www.utdanacenter.org/theo/enrollmentaids.html](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/enrollmentaids.html).*

**Operation School Bell, Austin ISD:  
New Clothing for Kids in Need**

*Austin ISD's Operation School Bell is one of the state's most effective programs for providing clothing for students in homeless situations. Project HELP's Cathy Requejo explains:*

*"We collaborate with the Assistance League of Austin, which operates under the auspices of the National Assistance League, to supply free new clothing to elementary, middle school, and high school students. A representative of Project HELP or someone from a school will refer a student to Operation School Bell, and that child will receive five days' change of clothes—three bottoms, five tops, five pairs of underpants, five pairs of socks, a hygiene packet that includes toothpaste, soap, deodorant, and a toothbrush, a backpack, a coat or light jacket, and a voucher for shoes. This costs about \$250 per student. We've served many, many school-age children in this way. Operation School Bell has been responsible for keeping a lot of these kids in school."*

- Establish a workable, clearly understood enrollment procedure.
- Make sure students and their parents have as much enrollment material as possible before going to the school campus.
- Create an enrollment packet, which includes necessary forms, and make sure the shelter or other provider prepares the material before a student goes to enroll.
- Establish a regular procedure that involves calling the school and letting them know a student is on his or her way there.

Diana Clive describes how Brownsville ISD has implemented this practice. "From the time our homeless project began," she says, "we worked out a system for enrolling children at the shelter. Through person-to-person interaction and pamphlets, we made parents aware of their rights under the McKinney-Vento Act. School personnel were also in-serviced on the laws governing enrollment of the children, with a copy of related statutes distributed to attendance personnel, data entry personnel, counselors, and principals. We communicated to schools outside the district by phone, obtaining the release of records as needed. We gave bus tickets to parents who needed to take their children for immunization updates."

The Brownsville enrollment process has been remarkably effective. Thanks to this procedure, children who have not been attending school at all can be successfully enrolled *in a single day*.

### ***Working around common barriers***

Students in homeless situations tend to face a common set of problems as they enroll in school. As we've seen, they often lack immunization records. They also lack school records, making it difficult to assess their grade level and determine whether they may have special needs.

The following simple practices have proven effective in dealing with enrollment barriers:

- Develop standard operating procedures to use every time, rather than treating frequently occurring problems on an emergency ad hoc basis.
- Create a set of steps for enrolling students without school records, such as contacting previous schools to obtain the records. (Remember: a lack of records must not prevent enrollment; by law, all students have 30 days to produce records after entering school.)
- Develop a process for enrolling students with no shot records or tuberculosis (TB) screening. (Again, the state allows 30 days to produce immunization records.)
- Develop a quick assessment process to facilitate appropriate placement.

The Arlington ISD has instituted a number of effective practices. Betsy Foreman, an Arlington ISD liaison, explains: "If a school balks at enrolling one of our kids because



they don't have school or immunization records, we say, 'You have to enroll them. Then, if you can't get the records yourself, contact us.' We will network either through the schools or through Austin to get the records. Sometimes it's a matter of having the records, but the parents don't know where they are—in which case we help the parents find them. They often have them in a storage unit or someplace else. If I make the contact, they'll make an extra effort to remember where.

"We also frequently use principals for this," Betsy continues. "One school, for example, didn't want to release a student's records because the family owed them money. They told us they hold paperwork if a student hasn't paid fees. So our principal called that school's principal and said, 'Wait a minute, you can't do that.' This person-to-person contact is often quite effective."

## **Free Meals and Supplies: Supporting Ongoing Attendance**

According to a memo released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees school meal programs, all students in homeless situations are eligible for free and reduced-price meal programs. What's more, they're entitled to the basic supplies they need to perform adequately in the classroom. (For a complete overview of this memo, visit the THEO website at [www.utdanacenter.org/theo/basic\\_meals.html](http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/basic_meals.html).) Following are a number of ideas for making sure that these provisions are met.

### ***Fast, hassle-free enrollment in the free meal program***

Not only are students experiencing homelessness eligible for free food at school, most of them urgently need immediate access to free meal programs. For this reason, enrollment in these programs should be an integral part of the overall enrollment process.

For example, Houston ISD's Project Su Casa used an effective procedure for free meal enrollment. First, the project staff arranged meetings with the district's Director of Food Service. Together, the staff and the director reviewed the eligibility requirements for meal programs and implemented a procedure for enrollment. Students simply had to present a signature from their shelter or from Project Su Casa indicating they were homeless. So that the process would be applied across the board, the appropriate districtwide food service personnel were informed of laws regarding the issue and given a heads-up about how the process would work. These procedures were in place before they became the adopted practice required by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for all school nutrition programs. An important note: This process should always be handled discreetly so as not to embarrass a child.

### ***Basic supplies***

One of the biggest—and potentially most humiliating—problems faced by students in homeless situations is their inability to buy pens, pencils, notebooks, rulers, and other basic school supplies. The problem is further compounded when their school requires uniforms. When you're barely able to feed yourself and your family purchasing supplies and uniforms is simply out of the question.

**Attacking the notarized proof of  
residency requirement:  
Amarillo ISD**

**Cathy Galloway, Liaison,  
Amarillo ISD:**

*"Prior to the McKinney-Vento project's influence in our district, children and youth who were experiencing homelessness were routinely denied enrollment to school due to their inability to produce a notarized proof of residency. Counselors commonly displayed notices warning that the document was needed prior to enrollment.*

*"We had several families who were troubled by this policy because they had family and friends living with them, with neither their landlord's knowledge nor approval. Obtaining a letter of residency from the landlord would mean expulsion—and, of course, an even worse homeless situation. In many cases, the families would opt to refrain from sending the children to school altogether, allowing them to miss months or even years of school.*

*"To counter the effects of the rule, we have educated the counselors, secretaries, and clerks around registration time. Our most successful tactic, though, has been to actively enlist the secretaries and clerks into our game plan. In our district, the secretary is often first to encounter the students, and if accompanied by parents, the whole family. I try to build them up, so that they feel more in tune with the process of identifying and supporting our students.*

*"By supplying the secretaries and counselor clerks with addresses of our shelters, and by phoning and visiting them frequently, we have created new and enhanced lines of communication and concern with our schools' support staff. Honest appreciation and intentional inclusion have paid big dividends."*

A big challenge, then, is to ensure that the students receive these items. The process of supplying them should be as seamless and discreet as possible. What's the desired outcome? The students should feel they belong in the classroom like everyone else and that they're equipped to perform effectively.

Many schools and districts have built-in ways to provide for economically disadvantaged students at the beginning of the school year. Homeless education staff can find out what the school offers and determine how to help students take advantage of what's available. Supplies should be provided not just when school starts but throughout the year; students use up their notebooks and pencils, and they outgrow clothing.

*Many schools and districts have built-in ways to provide for economically disadvantaged students at the beginning of the school year. Homeless education staff can find out what the school offers and determine how to help students take advantage of what's available.*

The Region 19 Education Service Center's homeless education program provides its students with needed supplies. "The liaison and intake worker coordinated with the public school teachers to request a school supply list from every student at the start of the school year," says Region 19 coordinator Rose Tarin. "Homeless students now have all the supplies they need. As part of our McKinney-Vento grant, we also give each student a backpack for carrying his or her supplies."

In the Houston ISD, many schools require school uniforms, and students must have these uniforms at enrollment time. The district's Project Su Casa makes it a priority to provide these uniforms on an as-needed basis to all the students in homeless situations. The project collaborates with the shelters to distribute the uniforms, along with supplies, throughout the year as the families request them. When schools make purchases for students experiencing homelessness, the project reimburses them.

## **Residency and Guardianship Issues**

The proof-of-residency requirement for school districts has historically been a notorious roadblock to the enrollment of students in homeless situations. What is "proof of residency"? Often, it is an affidavit, signed by a parent, caregiver, or other adult, verifying that a student lives within a school's attendance zone. Many schools and districts require such a document as a condition of enrollment. The obvious problem is that such an affidavit is virtually impossible for people experiencing homelessness.

What's more, Texas law does not require students to be in the custody of a parent or legal guardian in order to enroll in school. A district that wants proof of guardianship can try to obtain such proof, but it cannot refuse to enroll a student due to the lack of it. By law, *any* adult can enroll a child in school in the state of Texas. A district may request a statement of responsibility—sometimes referred to as a *power of attorney affidavit*—from the presenting adult, but it cannot bar enrollment if the statement is not forthcoming.

The following strategies are effective in making sure the proof-of-residency requirement does not stop students in homeless situations from enrolling in school:

- Raise educators' awareness of the fact that proof of residency is not required of homeless people, and help change local policies to reflect this.
- Be extra vigilant in making sure that doubled-up families are not required to submit proof of residency.

### ***Raising awareness of the law***

The Texas Education Code is clear, and so is the McKinney-Vento legislation: *Homeless students do not have to provide proof of residency; by law they do not have to have a residence.* For example, a district's representative is barred from saying, "Bring me a letter from your aunt verifying that you're homeless and living with her."

*The Texas Education Code is clear, and so is the McKinney-Vento legislation: Homeless students do not have to provide proof of residency; by law they do not have to have a residence.*

At the same time, LEAs *can* conduct their own checks to verify homelessness. While they are restricted from singling out the homeless population in conducting these checks, homeless students frequently suffer from the practice nonetheless. Take what often happens in one district, for example (the name of the district has not been given to preserve anonymity). "The schools do their residency follow-up for everyone," says the liaison. "They'll find a student who's not living in the attendance zone, then kick them out. We say, 'This student is homeless and by law can stay in school if attendance is not the issue.' Or schools have home visits, find a student's not living at their given address, and assume they're no longer homeless, or no longer entitled to stay in the school. The problem is, these students jump from friends to relatives to strangers all the time. So we have to step in and say, 'Hey, they're homeless; they're no longer at their previous address, but they're still homeless, and they're entitled to remain in this school.'"

Like many issues surrounding homelessness, this is a complex problem. The upshot

**Enrolling Youth in Shelters:  
Brownsville ISD**

**Diana Clive, LEA Liaison,  
Brownsville ISD:**

*"Prior to the implementation of the McKinney-Vento program in BISD, youths in the Ozanam Shelter were not attending school. Mostly refugees from Mexico and Central America, these youth were non-English speaking, often here by themselves, and frequently traumatized by their recent journey. They were totally unfamiliar with their right to an education in this country. Mainly, they were concerned with simple survival—and with the need to avoid border patrol officers. BISD personnel at the zoned schools were mostly unaware of the rights of homeless children to attend school regardless of available documentation. Finally, the nurse's office was concerned that all children have their immunization and TB tests.*

*"When the McKinney-Vento program began, our staff started educating the shelter personnel on the rights of youth to attend school and also informed shelter newcomers about their educational rights. We arranged to do paperwork at the shelter and to work around birth certificate requirements. Students and parents were assured that they would be safe on school buses and in the schools themselves, and we explained the laws governing border patrol activities. We handed out pamphlets in the appropriate language, and also called the shelter staff to check on new arrivals. School personnel received in-service training on enrollment procedures related to homeless students.*

*(continued on next page)*

is that *schools should not be asking for any sort of residency affidavit from families who are homeless, nor should they demand that homeless families stay put.* Once again, though, the law alone is not sufficient to ensure these things don't happen. Everyone on a campus should be made aware that a notarized proof of residency is not required—and should not be requested—of students in homeless situations. They should know that the students move frequently; even if they move outside the district, they're still entitled to stay in school. Without awareness, the law is virtually worthless. If districts don't know better, they will simply continue turning away students who cannot prove they live in a particular place. Once aware of the law, districts should ensure that local policies are in compliance with state and federal laws and should inform their staffs accordingly.

### ***Focusing on doubled-up families***

According to the McKinney-Vento Act, the term "homeless children and youth" specifically includes those "who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason." In other words, many doubled-up families are, by legal definition, homeless.

These families, then, are also exempt from the proof-of-residency requirement. What's more, they can be adversely affected when districts demand the affidavits. Why? A simple reason: Doubled-up families may be violating a clause in a lease agreement. If a school district calls a landlord to verify residence, the landlord becomes aware that two families are living doubled-up in the complex. As a result, both families can be evicted.

It is vitally important, then, that school and district administrators be aware of the precarious situation of doubled-up families; they should take no action that could result in these families' evictions.

## **Targeting Shelter- and Motel-Bound Youth Who Are Not in School**

The vast majority of homeless shelters require that any school-age child residing in the shelter must attend school. Once again, though, rules are one thing, reality another. The fact is, many children in shelters are *not* in school. Because motels have no school attendance requirements at all, there are undoubtedly children living in motels who are not in the classroom.

Three activities can help remedy this situation:

- *LEA liaisons* should be closely involved to make sure these youth get in school.
- *Special awareness activities* should target shelter staff and motel managers, focusing on the need for all school-age children at the facility to attend school. These folks also need information about the enrollment process that explains what they can do to help ease the enrollment of these students.

- *Parents and caregivers* who are with the children should be targeted for special outreach activities so that they can get on board and help make sure the students go to school.

Houston ISD uses these practices in their outreach efforts with shelters and motels. The Project Su Casa staff has educated shelter workers and motel managers about the importance of school attendance and about laws relating to absenteeism and truancy. As a result, shelter staff and motel managers have substantially boosted school attendance in the district.

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*"After several meetings with district personnel, we worked out an agreement to facilitate enrollment of these children. We also helped facilitate referrals to the local clinic for immunizations and TB testing for the youth before enrollment, and the nurse's office also agreed to do TB tests on campus as needed. Getting these youth in school has been a major accomplishment of our project."*

## Loss of Average Daily Attendance: Addressing a Major Concern

When it comes to average daily attendance (ADA), some schools perceive students living in shelters as a potential liability. Shelters have length-of-stay restrictions, and when students leave a shelter they frequently also leave the district—often without notifying the school or formally withdrawing. And, because the school lacks information about their whereabouts, they're required to count them absent. What's the result? The school loses ADA funding, and this loss leads administrators to resent the children—a resentment that ultimately undermines the students' chance of success.

Amarillo ISD found a creative way to work around this problem—a process that can easily be implemented in any district. Working closely with the school personnel, the homeless education program helped write a policy with the following provisions:

- When a student is absent for three consecutive days and the school has received no communication from parents or the shelter, the student is withdrawn.
- If the student wishes to return to the school, he or she is simply re-enrolled with no penalties.

Amarillo liaison Cathy Galloway describes this solution as a win-win for both the students and the schools. "The ADA-related burden on the school has been alleviated," says Cathy. "At the same time, school personnel have a healthier, more positive attitude toward the students."



## CHAPTER 3

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### **ENROLLMENT AND ATTENDANCE: GETTING THEM THERE, KEEPING THEM THERE**

**Schools have been notoriously resistant to enrolling students in homeless situations.**

Worse, lack of proper nutrition, medical care, clothing, and supplies makes it hard for the students to stay in the classroom.

**The LEA liaison is critical for enrollment and attendance. The liaison**

- addresses unique problems as they arise;
- serves as a point person for resolving conflicts;
- compiles and distributes enrollment-related materials;
- helps families gather records; and
- serves as a contact point between students and service providers.

**Work with shelters to ensure efficient enrollment:**

- Establish a clear, consistent enrollment procedure.
- Develop thorough enrollment materials, with forms and other needed items.
- Come up with a way to inform schools when a student is coming.

**Break down barriers by establishing**

- steps for enrolling students without school records, a permanent address, or a parent/legal guardian;
- a process for enrolling students with no shot records or TB screening; and
- an assessment process to identify placement.

**Support attendance with free meals and supplies:**

- Make enrollment in the free meal program an integral part of the enrollment process.
- Support programs that provide free clothing and supplies.
- Use absolute discretion—otherwise, a child can be humiliated.



**Deal effectively with the proof-of-residency requirement:**

- Alert others that no proof of residency is required of students in homeless situations.
- Promote district-wide awareness of the law.
- Be sensitive to the special circumstances of doubled-up families. Checking with a landlord could mean eviction!

**Target shelter- and motel-bound youth for enrollment:**

- Develop outreach and awareness campaigns aimed at shelter and motel staff.
- Remember that many of these people want to help.

**Address schools' fear of losing average daily attendance (ADA):**

- Establish a policy enabling the school to withdraw a student after three days' absence.
- Provide easy re-enrollment if the student returns to school.
- Reduce resentment toward students experiencing homelessness.

## CHAPTER 4

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### TRANSPORTATION AND MOBILITY: AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR ACHIEVEMENT

One of the major problems of homelessness is a lack of reliable transportation. Obviously, to attend school, a student must get there in the first place. Properly managed, school transportation can be a successful way to help minimize the negative effects of mobility.

Several years back, Project Su Casa—the homeless education program in Houston ISD—decided to tackle some of the district’s most serious school attendance problems. Students experiencing homelessness were frequently absent—much more often than other students. In addition, their drop-out rate was alarmingly high. The project knew that the root cause of these behaviors was as complex and multifaceted as the problem of homelessness itself. At the same time, they thought there had to be some practical, easy way to help keep these students in the classroom.

Project Su Casa found just such a solution, and it has made a huge difference for Houston’s population of homeless students. The solution was simply this: improve transportation. If students can’t get to school regularly, they probably won’t do well when there. So Project Su Casa staff arranged for the district’s transportation department to establish additional bus stops for the students. They also provided bus tokens. In some cases, they even transported students themselves until longer-term accommodations could be made. The project staff worked with principals to make sure the students could get to and from social and academic activities after school. When needed, they provided reimbursements. What’s more, the project made sure that these highly mobile children were able to stay in their schools of origin if they moved during the school year.

The above example pinpoints the issues we’ll be discussing in this chapter:

- Why transportation is such a major problem for students experiencing homelessness.
- What techniques can be used to help solve this problem.
- How you can help promote stability—and thereby enhance educational opportunity—for this very mobile population of students.

### Transportation: Getting Them Where They Need to Be

When it comes to transportation, the first thing to consider is that the McKinney-Vento Act *mandates* that students in homeless situations receive transportation to their school of origin—and that this transportation be provided or arranged by the school district or through a joint effort among LEAs.

The law recognizes and addresses one of the most intractable problems of homelessness. Transportation-wise, homeless students face a complex challenge: not only do their families often lack reliable cars and money for public transportation, but homeless shelters tend to be located in inconvenient—even hazardous—places. Many Texas shelters occupy areas on the outskirts of central business districts, in neighborhoods characterized by light industry and industrial warehouses. Grim and sparsely populated, these areas often have interstates or other highways running right through them. Most of the shelters are far from schools—but even if a school is within walking distance, no school-age children should have to navigate major roadways and abandoned warehouses on their way to the classroom.

It is crucially important to solve transportation problems and make sure that school districts follow the law. Successful practices have shown that there are three primary ways to do so:

- Like Project Su Casa, work with the district transportation office to add bus stops.
- Work outside the transportation office, providing transport through alternative means.
- Give students and families transportation subsidies so they can use the public system.

### ***Arranging for additional school bus stops***

Most district transportation offices are more than amenable to accommodating the needs of students in homeless situations. If shelters, motels, or other temporary housing arrangements are far from the schools, it may be necessary to arrange for bus stops to pick up those students. But homeless education staff should also ask for new bus stops when the shelters are hazardously located—even if they're within walking distance of school.

*Homeless education staff should ask for new bus stops when the shelters are hazardously located—even if they're within walking distance of school.*

We've seen how Houston's Project Su Casa went about adding bus stops in their district. Brownsville ISD provides another good example. "We had several conversations and meetings with the director of transportation to add bus stops at or near shelters," says Brownsville liaison Diana Clive. "Moreover, we worked out a system of fax notification to let drivers know when new students needed pick-up. After the first year, regular routes were scheduled to stop at the shelters. Today, a phone call is all that's needed when new students need to be served. When there are problems, we communicate with the dispatch department. Shelter staff also have the transportation phone number, and so does the after-school tutoring staff."

### ***Using alternative means of transportation***

Again, the school district is *required* to provide or arrange for transportation. Realistically, a district's own transportation system may be inadequate to the task or even non-existent. In that case, homeless education staff must find alternatives. Sometimes this requires grant funds, donations, or other additional resources.

### ***Shelter vans***

One alternative might be to lease a van from a shelter; perhaps the driver could be doing double-duty as a classroom teaching assistant. Another possibility might be a solution similar to the one used by the Region 19 Education Service Center, where some of the shelters transport kids to school—reimbursed by school district transportation funds—while the district arranges for them to be ferried to and from field trips.

### ***Churches and community groups***

A particularly creative and comprehensive transportation solution has been developed in Arlington, a city where, as liaison Betsy Foreman puts it, "There are no sidewalks—so even if the students walk, they're on the side of a road." Mission Arlington, run by the city's First Baptist Church, has made it a priority to make sure students in homeless situations get to school; therefore, the mission provides regular transportation for many of the students. In addition, the homeless education project has contracted with Arlington's Boys and Girls Club to pick up students living in motels on Division Street, an area that's considered dangerous. "The club provides transportation after school to the club, then back home after the students have spent some time there," Betsy says.

### ***Summertime transportation***

Adequate transportation to and from summertime activities is a special and important issue for students experiencing homelessness. In Weatherford ISD, Parker County and Durham systems, the only public transportation providers available, carry students to school during the school year and to an adventure camp over the summer. What's more, the system transports students to medical, dental, psychological, and vision services as needed.

### ***Providing subsidies for the public transportation system***

Many districts hand out public bus tickets to students and families. Northside ISD has used this method with successful results. The tokens not only enable parents to take their children to school, but they also help them keep their kids in their schools of origin so they can finish out a school year. "Middle and high school students, especially those graduating that year, have found this option helpful as they struggle to continue in school and finish out the year," says Northside ISD's Marta Martinez.

"Although more needs to be done in our area, with its unique system of multiple school districts, students and parents now have a choice when faced with constant mobility due to homelessness. Elementary-age children experience stability in

**Victoria ISD KIDZconnection keeps students in the school of origin**

**Gail Brocklebank, KIDZconnection Director, Victoria ISD:**

*"During the first year of our program, KIDZconnection identified a student who had moved among four elementary schools seven times in the first five months of school. This student had never been identified as homeless because there was no district-wide system in place to train campuses on how to identify and serve homeless students. His situation was far from unique.*

*"We realized we would have to educate administrators, office staff, and teachers in the rights of homeless students and in how to identify and assist the students. All the campus personnel attended this type of training in our first year.*

*"Soon, the number of identified students grew. That's when the district decided to hold a meeting to develop a workable district-wide plan. Attendees included the assistant superintendents, the Title I coordinator, the community specialist, and the attendance officer. This collaboration has led to complete support by the administration and school board, which are committed to identifying and educating our homeless students. For example, we've implemented a program called Family Connection, which reaches out to parents, students, schools, community agencies, and local businesses to provide the finances and personnel resources that will help students succeed in school and in life. A district parent center is open to parents of any child in the VISD area. Family Connection also supports the Parents as Teachers program, which has parent*

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their academic environment, and middle and high school students are given the opportunity and support to continue and finish school," Marta says.

## **Mobility: Aiming for Stability in a Time of Crisis**

A core condition of homelessness is a high rate of mobility, which can have huge negative effects on students and their families. They cope continuously with ever-changing housing situations, moving frequently from residence to residence. Most shelters have length-of-stay restrictions, meaning that even these relatively stable environments contribute to the mobility problem. Add high mobility to a lack of reliable transportation and the result is clear: students experiencing homelessness tend to miss a lot of school.

There is only so much anyone can do to reduce the impact of mobility on students because high mobility, like homelessness itself, is caused by forces that school districts and homeless education staff cannot remedy. However, some LEAs have been able to minimize the effects of mobility on students by using two basic approaches, both of which we'll discuss in the following sections:

- Connect the families with service providers who can help promote stability.
- Make sure students can stay in their school of origin throughout the school year even if they move, as required by the McKinney-Vento Act.

### ***Using service providers to promote stability***

Homelessness, emotional instability, financial anxiety, and school failure are but a few byproducts of the constant change brought about by homelessness. One way to counter these effects is by putting families in touch with local services that can encourage stability. Your community may have agencies that arrange for traditional housing or summer programs. Other organizations may help people find employment or *pro bono* counseling. The types of available services are as varied as our state's communities themselves, and it is important to help families and students tap into all of them. The most important thing a school or district can do for children who move frequently due to homelessness is provide a nurturing, stable environment.

*The most important thing a school or district can do for children who move frequently due to homelessness is provide a nurturing, stable environment.*

Later in this guide we'll closely examine the role of social and psychological services for families and students experiencing homelessness. For now, let's look at specific ways in which families have been linked up successfully with service providers in two LEAs: Houston ISD and the Region 13 Education Service Center.

## Houston ISD

Houston's Project Su Casa employs two techniques that help families and students achieve some semblance of stability. The project

- connects the families with social services organizations that help them find housing and employment, and
- successfully advocates for extended shelter stays until the clients find a residence that offers some stability.

## Region 13 Education Service Center

Sandy Lawrence of Region 13 ESC describes some of the ways in which social service agencies in the region step in to help families and students experiencing homelessness. "The Family Crisis Center in Bastrop offers art and play therapy to the children, which strengthens their coping skills and helps them adjust to turmoil in their lives. The Communities-in-Schools program at Harris Elementary in Austin has a summer program for homeless and at-risk children that focuses on building relationships with peers and increasing self-esteem and social skills.

"To ensure that children experiencing homelessness are academically prepared," Sandy continues, "it is important to provide after-school and summer programming. This helps fill in the gaps in their education due to frequent moves. Region 13, through the McKinney-Vento Act, provides funding for after-school and summer programs in the Manor, Liberty Hill, Flatonia, Bastrop, Del Valle, Elgin, Hays, and Austin school districts. We also run programs at SafePlace, Salvation Army, Austin Children's Shelter, the Greater San Marcos Youth Council, Family Crisis Center in Bastrop, and Advocacy Outreach."

## Keeping mobile students in their school of origin

The lives of students experiencing homelessness are full of disruption. One of the worst disruptions of all is having to change schools in the middle of the school year because your family has had to move yet again.

For years, homeless advocates and educators have fought to make sure this doesn't happen. The McKinney-Vento Act makes it easier for children to remain in the same school for longer periods of time. McKinney-Vento clearly states that, whenever feasible, students in homeless situations have the right to stay in the school they attended prior to becoming homeless—their school of origin—for the duration of homelessness or for the remainder of the academic year if the child becomes permanently housed during an academic year.

What are the benefits of students remaining in their school of origin? It gives them some continuity and stability in times of crisis and change. It allows them to continue with their studies and to avoid the inevitable difficulties inherent in switching schools. It gives teachers a chance to develop strong and lasting relationships with them and to effectively evaluate and address their specific learning styles. And it lets the students stay with their friends and classmates, decreasing the feelings of isolation and lack of control that often accompany relocating.

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educators going into 'at risk' family homes to help parents work with their young children.

"KIDZconnection provides transportation, when needed, to students in transitional living situations on all campuses, at the Victoria Youth Home, and at six other homeless shelters. We work closely with campus parent liaisons and administrators, our district STAR program (teen parenting), and social services agencies in the area. Once identified, homeless students are assisted on their individual campuses by their parent liaison, who provides any necessary school items, encourages participation in free after-school homework centers, and provides parents with information regarding the students' rights to remain in their schools of origin.

"Transportation is key to helping students remain in their school of origin. The parent liaison assists with the transportation arrangements. Most of the time, the homeless student rides on an existing VISD bus route to their school of origin. Should a VISD bus have to go off an existing route, KIDZconnection uses McKinney-Vento funds to cover the costs for that distance the bus would not ordinarily travel. This system does create extra work for our transportation department staff, but they are dedicated to helping our homeless students become successful in school and life.

"At KIDZconnection, our motto is this: One Child, One School, One Year. Teachers, parents, students, KIDZconnection, and our community partners think it's One Good Idea."

Clearly, then, it is extremely important to help students remain in their schools of origin. Here are some techniques that have proven successful:

- Use the awareness-raising tactics we've discussed to train district staff on the rights of students in homeless situations.
- Implement a process, such as San Antonio ISD's Student Residency Questionnaire, for identifying students who might be homeless.
- Inform these students and their parents of their right to remain in the school of origin.
- Ensure that students have needed transportation.
- Work with other service providers in the community to guarantee that students have full support—after-school tutoring, school supplies, psychological counseling, and so on.



## CHAPTER 4

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### **TRANSPORTATION AND MOBILITY: AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR ACHIEVEMENT**

**The McKinney-Vento Act requires school districts to provide or arrange transportation to school for students experiencing homelessness. The law recognizes that a lack of reliable transportation is one of the most pervasive problems of homelessness.**

#### **Ways to ensure adequate transportation:**

- Petition the district for additional bus stops.
- Reconfigure existing routes to allow student transfers from one route to another at designated pick-up and drop-off points.
- Designate stops for close-to-school shelters and motels, if they're located in dangerous areas.
- Arrange for shelter vans.
- Make use of special education transportation.
- Solicit help from churches and community groups.
- Implement summertime transportation programs.
- Provide subsidies and tokens for the public transportation system.

#### **Ways to minimize the negative effects of mobility on students:**

- Connect students with service providers that encourage stability.
- Advocate for extended shelter stays.

#### **How to help keep mobile students in their school of origin:**

- McKinney-Vento states that students must be able to stay in the school they attended prior to homelessness.
- Train staff on school-of-origin rights.
- Establish a process for identifying who is homeless.
- Offer awareness training for parents and students.
- Ensure adequate transportation—a must!



## CHAPTER 5

### ACADEMICS AND PROGRAMS: MAXIMIZING STUDENTS' SUCCESS

Once your students have access to reliable transportation to school and services, they will need access to *academic assistance* and *special programs* to help them achieve success.

Academic achievement is a priority for the Northeast ISD homeless education project. In the past, a major barrier to this goal has been the lack of effective tutoring for students in homeless situations. The district's community education department ran after-school programs for elementary-age kids, but no tutoring was provided. Middle schoolers simply returned after school to their shelter, which also lacked tutoring. Many high school students were failing their classes and desperately needed tutoring services.

To remedy this problem, the homeless education project designed a comprehensive solution that has benefited students in all age groups. "We encourage parents in homeless situations to enroll their elementary-age children in the after-school programs," says project head Barbara Bading. "Working with community education, we bring in master teachers to tutor both those kids *and* the ones with homes; whoever needs tutoring, gets it. We also call in special program people—the dyslexia coordinator, for example—to intervene quickly when we think a child may have special needs.

"For the middle school students, we send a tutor to the shelter," Barbara continues, "and we have one on campus for failing high schoolers. We've arranged, as well, to pay for summer school when a student needs that for promotion."

Structured, well-managed academic support activities like Northeast ISD's are indispensable for students experiencing homelessness. The reason such activities are so important is that these students have numerous special needs. On average, they are two years behind their grade level. They have alarmingly low rates of school attendance. They need more time in school, more instruction, and more academic opportunities than do their peers.

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**Academic Assessment:  
A Tale of Two Students**

**Cathy Requejo, Austin ISD LEA  
Liaison, on the value of academic  
assessments:**

*"The summaries we have students and families fill out provide indispensable information to teachers and the schools. One year, two summaries in particular popped out. One pertained to a middle school girl, whom the school believed had an academic problem. But when the assessment was done during the summer after the school year, it showed she was functioning at a strong academic level. At issue was how she was handling her homeless situation emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically. It was impacting her behavior. Teachers had been targeting the wrong place because she hadn't been academically assessed in school.*

*"In a reverse example, the school thought a middle school boy was just a problem kid. He was frustrated and had behavior issues. The academic assessment showed he was functioning at a very low level. He couldn't read. They'd been struggling with his behavior and not supporting him academically, which was what he actually needed.*

*"It's incredibly important to share this academic assessment information with the schools. They need to know where these students are academically, so that they can get them the extra help and support they need."*

In this chapter we'll explore ways to provide this extra academic support, from linking students with existing programs to providing homework spaces, tutoring programs, and enrichment activities. This chapter also offers ideas for summertime programs—a huge boon for our students—and explores ways to meet the unique challenges of serving special education students. Finally, we'll examine the tremendous advantages of parental involvement.

## **Academic Assistance: A Chance to Succeed**

Many communities have a wealth of programs and services to help their students perform well academically—both those in homeless situations and those with permanent housing. One effective approach is to connect students in homeless situations with these programs whenever possible. Another equally effective approach is to design services specifically aimed at students in homeless situations.

Many schools use both of these academic assistance strategies; some focus more on one than the other. Depending on the resources available, schools may use a combination of the two. We'll look at both approaches in the sections that follow.

### ***Linking students with existing programs***

Certainly, students experiencing homelessness should have access to all the academic services for which they're eligible. Many, if not most, schools offer a wide range of such services. Because these students are so mobile, it is important to quickly assess their needs and enroll them in the programs.

Austin's Project HELP provides an instructive example in this regard. "We piloted an academic assessment program when we realized these students tend to fall through the assessment crack," recalls Project HELP's Cathy Requejo. "The students are so mobile, and the assessments happen so late, that by the time we figure out what a particular student needs, he or she is often gone. So we said, 'Let's assess in a timely fashion and provide the information to teachers. Maybe it'll have an impact.'"

The project assesses students' needs at the time of the initial family intake, finding out about each child's academic standing, any academic support they're receiving, and whether tutoring or other enrichment is needed. When a student needs extra assistance, the project links him or her with campus- or community-based opportunities, such as reading support programs, special education services, math tutoring, and so on.

"When we connect students with what's most easily available, we can eliminate unnecessary duplication," says Cathy Requejo. "This approach also promotes effective collaboration among the various agencies and programs. Many families are unaware of academic support at their campus and in the surrounding community—or they're totally focused on food, shelter, clothing and work.

"By linking students with available academic services, we can ease the burden on parents who are trying to provide the basic needs. Our mantra is: 'We collaborate, we link.'"

*“By linking students with available academic services, we can ease the burden on parents who are trying to provide the basic needs. Our mantra is: ‘We collaborate, we link.’”*

***Cathy Requejo, Project HELP, Austin ISD***

### ***Creating new programs and services***

Students experiencing homelessness have needs that other students simply do not have. Often, for example, they’re living in crowded, chaotic shelters and have no good place to do their homework. As we saw earlier, tutoring is frequently unavailable due to a lack of transportation or some other roadblock. Moreover, the limited, circumscribed environments where many of these students live offer little or no stimulation—and virtually no way for them to experience the world outside their immediate circumstances.

In this section we’ll explore some programs and services that have proven successful in addressing these students’ unique academic needs. These efforts are essential for academic and emotional success:

- Provide a quiet space for homework.
- Establish tutoring programs in the shelters and at other community sites serving the students.
- Offer a range of special enrichment activities.

### ***A peaceful spot for homework***

Academically speaking, a quiet place to do homework can be one of the most critical services for students in homeless situations. We all need a quiet, organized space in which to study and write. Today, every student needs a computer for research and word processing. These resources are seldom found in the typical homeless shelter. Here’s how some Texas districts have created access to them for their students:

- Grand Prairie ISD offers students a homework lab complete with computers and supplies; additional tutoring is also available.
- Galveston ISD’s Discovery Club provides a space with computers, tutoring, and other school-related activities as well as a van driver who picks students up at school every day and then drops them off at the shelter after they’ve studied.

**A tutoring collaboration:**

**Using high school students to reach children experiencing homelessness**

***In Dallas ISD, a remarkably synergistic relationship has developed between local high schools and the Homeless Education Program:***

*"In 1996 and 1997, City Park Elementary School housed the Homeless Education Program and the Education and Social Services High School Magnet. Thus was born a partnership that has flourished ever since.*

*"Vickie Mokuria, a Magnet teacher, helps her seniors find work-study jobs. She is always looking for challenging, opportunity-rich environments, and the Homeless Education Program is just such an environment. Not only does Vickie place students in a variety of homeless and domestic violence shelters, but she has referred other district high school teachers to the Homeless Education Program as a potential work-study employer. As a result of this growing partnership, the program has been able to serve more and more children in homeless situations.*

*"These high school interns bring immeasurable energy and enthusiasm to the Homeless Education Program. The children at the schools and shelters are thrilled to work with the interns and look forward daily to their arrival. With their flexible hours, the interns are able to reach students who before were unreachable. In special cases, they will meet during the day with a middle school or elementary-aged student who's falling behind in his or her work. This kind of one-on-one attention does wonders for the children—academically and also emotionally."*

- Brownsville ISD offers a "Safe Haven" for after-school homework, complete with a tutor and snacks.

## ***Shelter- and community-based tutoring programs***

We've seen how the Northeast ISD worked out effective shelter- and community-based tutoring solutions for its students. Other examples of successful programs include the following:

- Brownsville ISD offers tutoring at homeless education community sites to which students are bused after school. The Brownsville program has certified teachers and three paraprofessionals who provide the service, plus an education coordinator who helps with the after-school component.
- In Galveston ISD, two teachers come to the Discovery Club every evening to tutor students; in addition, a student aide, who was in the homeless program many years ago, comes over from the high school to work with the students.
- Arlington ISD places AmeriCorps students in a wide range of tutoring programs.

Here are some tips for setting up a similar program in your district:

- If you lack the grant funds to hire certified teachers, actively recruit volunteer tutors from high schools, universities, churches, and volunteer organizations such as AmeriCorps and VISTA.
- Ensure that volunteer tutors are appropriately trained, both in tutoring techniques and in the special problems of homelessness.
- Where transportation is an issue, implement tutoring programs in the shelters or make sure that students can be bused to other sites where tutoring is provided.

## ***Enrichment activities***

A big part of learning takes place outside the classroom—in museums, on field trips, at plays and other cultural events, in nature, and more. Sadly, students in homeless situations enjoy far too few of these challenging and rewarding activities. Part of your job, then, is to provide them.

Enrichment activities should be an integral part of a district's homeless education effort. They raise students' self-esteem, expand their fund of knowledge, and ultimately translate into success in the classroom. Much anecdotal evidence, in fact, suggests that students in homeless situations who participate in enrichment activities get involved in band, cheerleading, spelling competitions, and student council; they often wind up being recognized by teachers and receiving awards.

*Much anecdotal evidence suggests that students in homeless situations who participate in enrichment activities get involved in band, cheerleading, spelling competitions, and student council; they often wind up being recognized by teachers and receiving awards.*

The following examples provide some ideas for enrichment programs. Some of the activities might require grant funds, but others can be established through perseverance, commitment, and sheer creativity. Best of all, they're fun!

#### ***Brownsville ISD: field trips and cultural outings***

Brownsville ISD's monthly field trips for students experiencing homelessness are much-anticipated events. The homeless education program arranges for BISD to bus the students (a service that a church, for example, might also donate). The goal is to expose children to the community and to involve them in experiential activities—horseback riding, dolphin watching, trekking through a wildlife refuge, and so on.

Plus, the Brownsville program involves the children in a cultural celebration every February. Everyone wears Mexican costumes, and there's a parade and other festivities. One year, liaison Diana Clive arranged for a dance troupe at the local university to perform for the students. "Getting to go to the university was great for the kids, a real treat," Diana says. "The education department wound up donating money to the program as well. We hope to do this annually."

#### ***Arlington ISD: fun educational activities***

Many of the enrichment activities in Arlington involve coordination between the homeless education program and the local Boys and Girls Club. Students have visited the Arlington Museum and gone on many other culturally enlightening outings. Plus, the program arranges for teachers to come into the shelters and conduct science experiments, give cooking classes, and provide other exciting, enriching activities for the students.

#### ***Galveston ISD: science experiments, arts and crafts, and more***

The Galveston ISD's Discovery Club is one of the state's exemplary after-school programs for students in homeless situations. The club sponsors regular field trips—including a nature hike in which the students collect items and then bring them back and discuss them. Scientific experiments are among other frequent activities, and the club also offers arts and crafts classes for artistic enrichment.



**Greenville and Plano ISDs:**  
**Partnering with UT Dallas for Exceptional Summer Programs**  
*If your district is near a university, you might try collaborating with that institution to fund and design effective summer programs. That's exactly what Greenville ISD and Plano ISD did, with very good results.*

**Greenville ISD:**  
*"The University of Texas at Dallas funds the Discovery educational summer program for the Grayson County Juvenile Alternatives program. One-of-a-kind adventures give shelter-bound youth communication and socialization skills, educational enrichment, improved self-esteem and self-worth, enhanced mental and physical health, and life skills. Trip destinations have included the Dallas Zoo, America's Ice Garden, Texoma Veterinary Hospital, Mrs. Baird's Bread, and Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Gardens. Plus, guest speakers give interactive presentations on everything from budgeting to career goals, cooking, tobacco, and drinking and driving.*

*"Community service projects introduce the students to volunteering and charity. They bake cookies and make cards for the Friendly Neighbor Program, help deliver meals to the elderly, pick up trash and litter at Hagerman Wildlife Refuge, and volunteer at the Grayson County Food Bank."*

*(continued on next page)*

## Summer Activities

For children with homes, summer is a time of pleasure and freedom—a much-anticipated break from the classroom, with plenty of unstructured time to just be a kid. Unfortunately, students in homeless situations don't necessarily share that experience. In fact, for them summer can be one of the most difficult times of the year. Shelters typically lack the resources to provide any activities, and parents are stretched to the max, trying to dig their way out of their situation. Often, children experiencing homelessness quite literally have nothing to do.

That's why it's critical to design a summertime program that keeps the students occupied in challenging, enjoyable ways. Activities might include special academic services, a series of enrichment activities, or a combination of the two. Here are a few examples:

- Take students to the local art museum, particularly when special exhibits are there; museums will often donate tickets to these kinds of groups.
- Work with the district to enroll students in existing summer programs designed for the larger student population.
- Arrange for field trips to surrounding nature preserves, zoos, and other attractions.
- Obtain grant money to pay teachers an hourly rate to come to your community site or to the shelters and provide tutoring as well as fun, interactive, hands-on learning activities.

The following sections describe what two Texas districts have done to provide summer activities for students experiencing homelessness.

### **Brownsville ISD: a comprehensive summer program**

The Brownsville ISD summer program lasts five to six weeks, offering half-day sessions five days a week. Cultural activities—Aztec dancing, drumming, bead weaving, herbal teachings, chess, and Tai Chi—are a big draw. Students also paint murals, put on plays, take trips to the local wildlife refuge, and more. For academic enrichment, the program includes two days a week in the computer lab. Fridays are usually designated as field trip days. The children, tutors, and steering committee all have input on program activities.

As an example of creativity in action, the Brownsville homeless education program arranged through the district's curriculum department to have summer school fees waived for students in homeless situations. As a result, students can now attend summer school; program activities are scheduled in the afternoons so as not to conflict with the morning summer school schedule.

### **Galveston ISD: from tutorials to trips**

Galveston's Discovery Club provides a wealth of educational support after school and throughout the summer to K–12 students experiencing homelessness. So successful is this exceptional program—with children, teachers, and parents alike—

that many district parents of children who are not in homeless situations want their kids to attend!

The club has a supervisor and two certified teachers, along with an arts and crafts teacher, two student aides, and many volunteers. Students come from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., every day, all summer long. “They have constant needs,” explains liaison Kelley Romar. “We have to maintain our support, because otherwise they’ll get behind over the summer. Our programs help them maintain their focus and retain the education they’ve received during the school year.”

Summer programs at the Discovery Club are extremely varied, with lots of tutorials, TAKS preparation sessions, classes in test-taking skills, and trips to educational and cultural institutions such as the Houston Children’s Museum and NASA. The homeless education program taps into the community, obtaining scholarships for students to swim at the YMCA, attend summer programs at the local college and junior college, go to Sea Camp, and more. “The students are exposed to many wonderful learning opportunities,” says Kelley. “We want to open their minds and help them see we’re all there to look out for each other and support each other.”

## Special Education

Earlier in this chapter we emphasized the importance of quickly assessing the educational needs of our highly mobile students and enrolling them in needed programs. These requirements increase dramatically with special education students. For these students to have any hope of success, they must be able to participate in programs specifically geared to serve students with disabilities. The faster they get access to these programs, the better.

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The assessment of special education students can be expedited in these ways:

- When a student moves to a new district, make sure that district is immediately alerted to any special education services he or she was receiving previously.
- If the student moved before the assessment was completed, continue the assessment process where the previously attended district left off.
- Ensure that the student’s Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee meets soon after enrollment to develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

*(continued from previous page)*

### **Plano ISD:**

*“In Plano, Kids’ University is a week-long university-based summer day camp for children experiencing homelessness. The university schedule runs from 9:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Classes taught by volunteers, teachers, and professional instructors include computer instruction, career planning, arts and crafts, science, sign language, recreation, and performing arts. A camp director and “floaters” round out the camp staff.*

*“With its innovative and creative learning experiences on a college campus, Kids’ University improves children’s academic, social, and recreational skills. Most important, children get a week of fun and an opportunity to be like “other kids.” Through playful, structured group activities, they have a chance to incorporate fantasy into goal-setting in a safe, consistent environment. Positive adult role modeling plays a key role in enhancing the kids’ self-awareness, self-worth, relationships, and ability to make healthy choices.”*

- Get the student to the head of the priority list so that his or her ARD meeting can be completed as quickly as possible.
- Use McKinney-Vento or other funds to hire an outside evaluator.

To ensure that these things happen, actively intervene in the process and be certain that you know and can communicate both the circumstances of these students and the laws and rules regarding special education. Active intervention results in timely access to services by the students who need them. The experiences of three LEAs—Brownsville ISD, Houston ISD, and Region 19 Education Service Center—are very instructive in this regard.

### ***Brownsville ISD: streamlining the ARD process***

Early on, the Brownsville ISD homeless education program realized the importance of having a knowledgeable person intervene in the interests of special education students. It was clear, recalls liaison Diana Clive, that the schools had little experience scheduling ARD meetings to rapidly place special education students experiencing homelessness. “A seven-year-old blind girl had never been in school,” says Diana, “so I telephoned the local school’s records staff and explained the time-limited shelter stay the family was dealing with. I pressed for a date and asked to attend the ARD. There, the staff spoke mostly English, and I asked them to translate for the parents’ benefit. The ARD was successfully completed a few days after the family arrived in the shelter. This precedent-setting ARD made future ones much easier.”

### ***Houston ISD: a focal point for quick placement***

Houston ISD’s Project Su Casa had a similar experience. Initially, shelters and teachers contacted the project staff for assistance with students’ educational placement. Before long, the project’s ability to help in this area became well known, and parents began calling social workers directly for assistance. ARD committees were immediately arranged, and appropriate educational placement was secured.

### ***Region 19 ESC: revving up the referrals process***

“At some point,” says Rose Tarin of Region 19 ESC, “we realized students in homeless situations were not being referred to speech therapy, early childhood intervention (ECI), Child Find, and other special education services. With students’ high mobility, paperwork was frequently lost. There was no accountability. Worse, parents were unaware of the referral process and therefore unable to advocate for their children’s rights; they were viewed as uncaring because they did not attend scheduled meetings,” says Rose. “We coordinated efforts with school district personnel, such as nurses, speech therapists, and teachers, and with the agencies, such as ECI, Child Find, and Head Start. That sped up the referral process. We also made sure the homeless program teachers accompanied parents to the scheduled ARD, IEP, and teacher conferences, and that parents knew about their children’s rights.”

***Design an effective enrollment/withdrawal process***

The enrollment/withdrawal process should facilitate access to special education services. Here are some actions you can take to make the transition easier:

- Call the originating district to verify special education referral status or enrollment.
- Prioritize the assessment of students experiencing homelessness.
- Give a withdrawing student's family any available ARD information.

**Parental Involvement**

When designing a program for enhancing your students' academic achievement, it is critical to involve the parents. This requires a great deal of proactive planning and sensitivity. It also requires an awareness of what it's like to be a parent who must struggle to meet the basic needs of clothing, shelter, and employment. Not only are they stressed, anxious, and preoccupied with these fundamental issues, they often lack access to reliable transportation. Expecting them to interact with schools and teachers in the same way other parents do is unrealistic.

For those reasons, it is useful to employ any or all of following strategies, which we'll discuss in the sections that follow:

- Hold parent/teacher meetings at the shelters where the parents live.
- Conduct meetings during school events that the parents are likely to attend.
- Develop and distribute relevant materials to the parents.
- Include parents in academic enrichment activities, such as field trips.

***Holding parent/teacher meetings at the shelters***

Parents experiencing homelessness want to feel that they're part of the community and that they're involved in their children's lives and educations. One way to make this happen is to hold regular meetings, such as Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, at homeless shelters.

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Dallas ISD uses this strategy quite successfully. Dallas liaison Mark Pierce recalls: “In my first year as program manager of the Homeless Education Program, I discovered that shelter parents did not actively participate in their children’s education. There were a number of reasons. Some PTAs were conducted almost entirely in English without translation for the Spanish-speaking parents; many parents lacked transportation to the schools; and it was dangerous to walk through the surrounding neighborhoods at night. The parents also complained that the teachers knew the shelter childrens’ stay would be short—and therefore not worth investing the time or energy.

“The parents were missing out on important opportunities to become a part of their children’s educational process,” continues Mark, “and the schools were opting out to passive neglect rather than active engagement. The solution we came up with was to start conducting PTAs at the shelters.”

Now a regular part of the Dallas ISD, these shelter-based PTAs are attended by homeless education staff members, school principals and counselors, community liaisons, and often teachers. Topics include everything from TAKS testing to after-school tutoring programs, the legal rights of homeless families, tenants’ rights, and good parenting skills. Parents ask questions and air their concerns about such matters as school uniforms, the school meals program, and—far more seriously—problems such as the intentional and unintentional targeting of shelter children by teachers and students in the classroom. These meetings have been a resounding success, giving parents a forum and connecting them with the people involved with their children’s education on a daily basis.

### ***Holding parent/teacher meetings during school events***

Galveston ISD meets with the parents at events they are likely to attend. One of the more successful of these activities is the parental component of Family Fun Night, held monthly at the district’s Discovery Club. During Family Fun Night, the homeless education program’s case manager works with the parents to make a comprehensive plan of service—one that addresses the needs of both child and family. The case manager also facilitates parent/teacher meetings.

“Getting the parents to the Discovery Club meetings is extremely important,” says Galveston ISD liaison Kelley Romar. “We serve food—often even a full-cooked dinner—so that they won’t have to go home and cook afterwards. We also provide transportation. Another technique for getting parents there is to hold a meeting just prior to a scheduled field trip; the parents have to sign permission slips before the kids can go on the trips, so the students will bug their parents to go to the meeting so they can sign their permission slips.”

Galveston’s holistic approach to involving parents is working very well, Kelley says. “One of the children who attended Discovery Club stated to the newspaper, ‘We started coming here, and my grades still weren’t real good, so they went to my school and helped my mom be more organized and go to my school more. She didn’t really go to my teacher conferences or anything before. It helped me feel better about myself and realize that my mom loves us.’”

### ***Developing and distributing informational material for parents***

Cultivating parental awareness is the first step in any parental involvement effort. That's why you should, like Houston ISD, create a materials packet specifically geared toward the parents.

Houston's Project Su Casa sought ways to educate homeless students and their families regarding their rights. One of the most effective mechanisms they found was the "parent pak," which contains information explaining their rights while homeless and describing Project Su Casa's role in implementing the McKinney-Vento Act. Since this is a mobile population, the paks were routinely left at the shelters, so that all families could be aware of the project and its services. What's more, collaboration advisory meetings were held with youth service providers to coordinate services.





## CHAPTER 5

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### ACADEMICS AND PROGRAMS: MAXIMIZING STUDENTS' SUCCESS

**Students experiencing homelessness need extra academic support.**

They're two years behind grade level, on average. They have low rates of attendance. They need tutoring, enrichment, and more.

**Arrange for a wealth of academic assistance:**

- Timely referrals to existing school- and community-based programs
- New programs and services—created by you!
  - A quiet space for doing homework
  - Shelter- and community-based tutoring programs
  - Enrichment: museum trips, nature walks, and plays—use what's in your community

**Summer activities are critical for these students:**

- Offer comprehensive summertime programs: academics, tutoring, and fun activities.
- Design community service projects.

**Special education students pose a special challenge:**

- Promote quick assessment and enrollment in special education programs.
- Streamline and expedite the Admission, Review, Dismissal (ARD) process.
- Institute an effective enrollment/withdrawal process.

**Make involving the parents a top priority:**

- Conduct parent/teacher meetings at the shelters.
- Hold meetings during school events that parents are likely to attend.
- Distribute relevant informational materials to parents.
- Encourage parents to participate in field trips and other enrichment activities.



## CHAPTER 6

### SPECIAL SITUATIONS: UNIQUE SOLUTIONS TO UNIQUE PROBLEMS

The typical problems of homelessness are bad enough. Add pregnancy and teen parenthood to the mix, and the difficulties increase significantly. Domestic violence and living in motels only increase the multiple challenges faced by the homeless.

Clearly, pregnant and parenting teens who are homeless require a great deal of extra support and assistance. And they are not alone. Many students experience homelessness as a direct result of domestic violence, which creates monumental stress, insecurity, and financial and emotional havoc. Others live in cheap motels, usually located in neighborhoods that are unsavory at best, dangerous at worst. All these students present a range of unique challenges. In this chapter we'll address those challenges and offer suggestions for tackling them effectively. Here you will

- discover some of the characteristics of an effective case management program for serving pregnant and parenting teens;
- find out how you can communicate and collaborate successfully with domestic violence shelters; and
- learn how to maximize motel-bound students' opportunities to attend school.

### Serving Pregnant and Parenting Teens

Teen pregnancy continues to be a persistent challenge throughout our society. Sadly, it's also a problem that frequently accompanies homelessness. Many young women are kicked out of the house when they announce they're pregnant and instantly become homeless. Others, like Mary, find themselves in homeless situations that coincide with pregnancy and parenthood. All too often, the results include dropping out of school, poverty, and lack of medical care.

It is possible to help end this cycle and assist these young women in achieving both academic success *and* effective parenting. The best way to begin is to develop and implement a case management program that addresses each student's individual needs. Often this requires access to outside resources—community organizations, health care providers, counseling resources, and so on. And while grant money helps in this regard, it is not required. By working creatively, *any* district can develop workable strategies to ease the problems of pregnant and parenting teens in homeless situations.

This section describes some of the key issues addressed by an effective program:

- Enrollment
- Appropriate educational settings

#### Mary\*--age 16:

*"We were living in a trailer when I got pregnant. Then, just a few days before the baby was born, we had to move. My mom had gotten behind in the payments, and the landlord kicked us out. So we moved into my aunt's house in a nearby town, where my mom, my brother, my baby and I all shared one room. We stored our stuff in my aunt's garage, and the trailer was parked on her mother-in-law's land. "Soon after we moved into my aunt's place, we found land to park the trailer. Then they said we had to have 24 feet in front for a sidewalk. Ours is a single-wide and has to go long-ways, and that doesn't leave enough room. My mom doesn't have the credit to get a double-wide. My grandfather got a loan to buy some land about 20 miles away, but it turned out they have the same restriction—you have to have a double-wide. Now we're looking for another lot.*

*"I left school when we were kicked out. Then the baby was born, and I started trying to get enrolled in school in the town we were living in with my aunt. I was very concerned about getting my baby in day care. The baby's dad goes to High School A\*, so while we thought we'd be moving to where he lives, I tried to get into that school. They said no, High School A is not your district—High School B is the high school for your area. But High School B said you have to have a structure on land to enroll there, so I wasn't able to get in there either. Later on, when we didn't get the land, and realized we'd be staying at my aunt's for a while, I tried again to enroll in High School A. They said no way. They said I had no business over there, and the baby's dad being there was not a good enough reason. They said I wasn't homeless because I did have a place to stay."*

\* Names of the writer and schools mentioned have been changed to preserve anonymity.

- Day care and transportation
- Medical care
- Emotional problems
- Academic motivation and support
- Attendance
- Access to shelters
- Basic needs

We also offer examples of how some of our state's homeless education programs have tackled these issues, which reinforce a street-wise observation by Mary: "People need to plan ahead. Don't expect everything to go well all the time. Have a back-up plan available every now and then."

*"People need to plan ahead. Don't expect everything to go well all the time. Have a back-up plan available every now and then."*

***Mary, 16, parenting teen***

### ***Enrollment***

Mary's story amply illustrates this frustrating problem for pregnant and parenting teens experiencing homelessness. As you will recall, High School A refused to enroll Mary because she wasn't in the district and, according to them, because she wasn't homeless. High School B required proof of a housing structure on land. Mary's situation is hardly unique. In fact, so endemic is the enrollment problem that many pregnant teens simply drop out. A student in one McKinney-Vento project was out of school for two full years before re-enrolling. An untold number of these young women never make it back to the classroom—a devastating setback for them and for their children.

*A student in one McKinney-Vento project was out of school for two full years before re-enrolling. An untold number of these young women never make it back to the classroom—a devastating setback for them and for their children.*

In Mary's case, the homeless liaison came to the rescue. "The district referred me to the liaison, and the high school and the liaison had a battle," Mary recalls.

"The school had a day care center and happened to have an opening, and [the liaison] Cathy just fought for me until they let me in. My baby got into day care, and I started school. They said it was a waste of time coming back to school, said I wouldn't pass. But there were still several months left in the school year, so I put these remarks out of my mind and just kept going. I couldn't have done it without [the liaison's] help."

Victoria ISD provides another good example of working around this barrier. As part of Victoria's comprehensive district-wide case management program, the STAR (Students Taking Action and Responsibility) liaison refers a teen parent to the district's STARTeen Parenting Program. There, the liaison meets with the student and expedites enrollment—reminding school staff, if necessary, that the student has 30 days in which to submit transcripts, birth certificates, and other paperwork.

### ***Appropriate educational settings***

For obvious reasons, many teen parents need to be in work-study programs or require help getting jobs. They also need parenting classes at least as much as academic instruction. All too often, though, they're placed in regular school situations. Because they also have to work, they frequently wind up dropping out. Even worse, they're parenting without any of the skills this crucially important task demands.

*Teen parents need to be in work-study programs or require help getting jobs. They also need parenting classes at least as much as academic instruction.*

In Victoria, the STAR liaison addresses this problem by meeting with teachers, clerks, principals, assistant principals, counselors, special education counselors, diagnosticians, day care directors, the STAR coordinator, other STAR staff, Even Start personnel, and the Even Start coordinators. The liaison helps teen parents enroll in parenting classes and, when appropriate, vocational classes. In some cases, the liaison helps the teen parent get a job. One teen mom in Victoria, for example, is a cashier at Albertson's Food Store; a teen dad became the liaison's lawn attendant while also attending vocational classes at Victoria College and working another part-time job. Frequently the liaison helps a student get into a half-day work-study program or a flexible GED program.

The Region 13 Education Service Center solves the teen parenting problem another way—by collaborating with other local service providers. "We work with the Family Crisis Center in Bastrop," says Region 13 ESC's Sandy Lawrence. "They have a comprehensive teen parenting class that works well for the students."

### ***Day care and transportation***

Arranging for day care and transportation is a huge problem for teen parents in homeless situations, one that all too often leads to truancy and absenteeism.

We've seen how the homeless liaison helped Mary enroll in High School A, which had a day care center and also happened to have an opening at the right time. In Victoria, the STAR teacher liaison arranges for public transportation to the STAR office and to school, often obtaining vouchers from the city transit bus. The STAR program also provides day care for the teen parent.

The STAR liaison helped arrange transportation for a teen parent's mother to attend her daughter's graduation. The mother was a quadriplegic, and while it took more than 20 calls around town, in the end the liaison set up transportation with the help of a local hospital and a church.

*The STAR liaison once helped arrange transportation for a teen parent's mother to attend her daughter's graduation. The mother was a quadriplegic, and while it took more than 20 calls around town, in the end the liaison set up transportation with the help of a local hospital and a church.*

### ***Medical care***

Our country's health care situation is problematic even for middle-class families. Teen parents in homeless situations have an especially hard time in this regard.

Victoria's STAR liaison refers teen parents and their babies to the appropriate medical facilities, such as the Citizens Emergency Room or the Community Mother Child Clinic. The STAR teen parenting bus ferries the young families to these facilities. What's more, the liaison includes baby/infant CPR training, Medicaid information, and information about children's health insurance programs in all teen parenting classes.

### ***Emotional problems***

Overwhelmed by the demands and hormonal upsets of pregnancy, bewildered by the requirements of effective parenting, and depressed by homelessness, these young parents often become despondent—even to the point of considering suicide.

Many communities have organizations and agencies with established programs to help these youthful parents. In San Antonio, homeless education staff refer them to the Jewish Family Programs agency, a HUD-funded organization that provides

a wealth of services, including counseling, to pregnant and parenting teens. “We need to be able to work with the teen and the parent together,” says San Antonio’s Estella Garza. “We work closely with other agencies to make sure families get the services they need.”

Similarly, the Victoria program refers the teens to school counselors and special education counselors or to local mental health agencies. One student thus referred—who was initially suicidal—went on to graduate and to attend college.

### ***Academic motivation and support***

Again, these teen parents are often so overwhelmed that they simply are not motivated to stay in school. In Victoria, the STAR teacher liaison makes it a priority to make sure the student attends class, is successful there, and develops plans for college or vocational school. This involves creating a rapport with the student, making home and school visits, and referring the student to homework centers and tutoring as needed. Additionally, the liaison monitors grades and communicates with teachers, administrators, and other school personnel to ensure the student’s success.

### ***Attendance***

Attendance problems are a fact of life for these students, many of whom never get past the ninth grade. As we’ve seen, some are so discouraged they simply drop out, while others find themselves in juvenile detention centers for repeated truancy. This critical problem must be effectively addressed.

The Victoria STAR liaison tackles attendance problems through encouragement, collaboration, and community-wide networking. So successful is her intervention that two of the district’s teen parents, both of whom were in homeless situations, were awarded \$1,000 scholarships from the LeTendre fund sponsored by the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHY). One of them went on to Victoria College and enrolled in the nursing program.

### ***Shelter access***

Pregnant and parenting teens experiencing homelessness often lack access to shelters or other safe spaces in which to live. In Victoria, the STAR liaison works with shelter personnel to help teen parents and their babies. She also conducts shelter visits as needed.

In the Region 19 Education Service Center, the homeless education program sponsors a special shelter for pregnant teenage mothers between 17 and 21. The shelter offers GED preparation, screening for early-childhood education needs, and other much-needed services. The young women can stay for up to two years.



*In the Region 19 Education Service Center, the homeless education program sponsors a special shelter for pregnant teenage mothers between 17 and 21. The shelter offers GED preparation, screening for early-childhood education needs, and other much-needed services.*

### **Basic needs**

Obviously, these students usually lack the finances required to live, much less successfully raise a child. In Victoria, the STAR liaison refers the teen parent to appropriate agencies for items such as food, coats, and clothing. The liaison also attempts to locate housing for the students and their families, walking them through the housing application process and helping them follow up. During one school visit with a teen parent newly placed in an apartment, the liaison asked, “Is there anything you need?” The teen parent responded, “A bed would be nice. My baby and I are sleeping on the floor.” The liaison sent a districtwide email to all school personnel saying, “A small, formerly homeless family needs furniture, household items, etc.” The next morning, a school counselor and an elementary parent liaison delivered a bed and other items to the apartment. This is just one example of how this highly effective program uses networking and collaboration to serve the needs of these students.

### **Domestic Violence: Defusing a Threatening Situation**

One of your biggest challenges involves serving children who, usually with their mothers, are fleeing a domestic violence situation. Quite often, these students are living under a threat of imminent danger. They’ve recently been uprooted from their homes. They’re hiding in fear from someone who’s potentially very violent—yet who also may be someone they love. As a result, they have immense psychological and social needs. What’s more, their security is a big concern—so big, in fact, that failing to be sensitive to security can produce tragic consequences.

*With domestic violence, security is a big concern—so big, in fact, that failing to be sensitive to security can produce tragic consequences.*

In this section we’ll explore a host of domestic violence issues. As you’ll see, there are several concrete steps you can take to make sure the children remain in school and stay safe:

- Establish and maintain close, ongoing contact with your local domestic violence shelters and other providers.
- Design enrollment and withdrawal procedures for these students, always considering input from the domestic violence shelters.
- Create and implement special emergency procedures, also in collaboration with the shelters.

### ***A relationship with the domestic violence shelter***

It is important to visit with the staff at the local domestic violence shelter often and to be diligent about maintaining open lines of communication. In addition, nurturing close relationships with the schools serving students from these shelters provides connections that give quick access to information. This information makes it easier to intervene when critical situations arise and to link up the right people—parents and teachers, children and counselors, and so on—to address problems.

### ***Security-protecting enrollment and withdrawal***

When victims of domestic violence flee their abusers, the parent must make sure their children change schools; otherwise, the abusive party can find them easily. The victimized parent often finds this extremely difficult, however, after being paralyzed by fear for the safety of the family. Distraught, a parent might simply stop sending the children to school rather than risk trying to register them someplace else.

To address this problem, Brownsville ISD implemented a process for streamlining the withdrawal/enrollment process. “We set up meetings between shelter representatives and district personnel,” says Brownsville’s Diana Clive. “As we discussed concerns and solutions, we developed a process whereby a mother would be escorted to school when she was believed to be in danger. Essentially, the process works as follows. Any time there are children at the battered women’s shelter that need to be registered, we assess the level of immediate danger. If that danger is present, the school district’s campus police escort the mother to and from the school and also stay with her while the kids are being registered. The campus police department has assigned a contact person who makes the arrangements. Fortunately, we have few serious cases, and the procedure has been quite successful.”

### ***Emergency procedures***

To effectively deal with domestic violence concerns, homeless education staff must establish a set of clear procedures for defusing volatile situations. Here are suggestions:

- Do not allow the children to be filmed or photographed in groups; as one district discovered (see sidebar), such images allow them to be recognized and found.
- Notify the shelter of any and all events that might divulge the students’ identity or compromise their confidentiality.

**An unexpected security breach:  
How one district responded**

**Note: Domestic violence is a very sensitive issue that requires absolute confidentiality. For that reason, we're not identifying the location of this occurrence.**

*A potentially disastrous incident at a domestic violence shelter illustrates the critical nature of security for these children—and also the central role that homeless education staff can play in resolving problems. What happened was as unexpected as it was frightening.*

*In the course of a school event, one of the children from the shelter was filmed at school by a local TV station. After the news aired that evening, the boy's father—whose violent and brutish behavior had driven his family from their home—called a relative and said he “liked the boy's recent haircut.” It was evident that he now knew the family was still in town and he threatened to find them.*

*Not surprisingly, the family was distraught. The child's dad had serious psychiatric problems, an alcohol and drug abuse problem, and a fondness for guns. The shelter, of course, was extremely concerned and distressed. Shelter staff immediately alerted the McKinney program counselor and the boy's school, letting them know that the family might be in danger.*

*The shelter did not send the child to school the next day, but they were concerned that the father would come there and try to find his son. The school district police liaison was called to the school, which had planned a large event involving many people. The mood was tense*

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- Give caregivers as much information as possible so they can make informed choices concerning their clients' safety and well-being.

## Students in Motels: A Special Challenge

In many cities—for example, those where there is no homeless shelter—families in homeless situations often reside in motels. Serious problems attend this situation. Because motels are businesses not service providers, they offer none of the benefits that shelters provide. The chosen motels are necessarily inexpensive, which means they're frequently filthy, usually dangerous, and, all too often, hotbeds of criminal activity.

It takes a concerted effort on the part of homeless education staff to make sure students living in these motels can attend school. Here are some ways to do that:

- Provide adequate transportation.
- Visit the motels frequently to ensure that children are in school and to speak with parents.
- Conduct outreach and awareness for motel owners and managers.

### Transportation

In Chapter 4, we explored the special transportation needs of children living in motels. This is such an important issue, however, that it's worth reiterating here. These motels are often located along highways and interstates, in industrial areas, or in other dangerous locations. No child should have to navigate this type of terrain to get to school.

*Motels are often located along highways and interstates, in industrial areas, or in other dangerous locations. No child should have to navigate this type of terrain to get to school.*

Several districts have implemented solutions to the transportation problem—most notably, perhaps, Arlington ISD, where the many families living in motels along the city's Division Street desperately need transportation. As we saw in Chapter 4, the homeless education program has arranged with the local Boys and Girls Club to transport students to school. In addition, the program works with the schools to make sure the students don't get tardy slips when the club's van is late. When the kids need to attend special schools or events, Mission Arlington and Mission Metroplex citywide vans provide this transportation.

“This collaborative effort has been very successful,” says Arlington liaison Betsy Foreman. “So much so, in fact, that the Boys and Girls Club and Arlington ISD won Tarrant County's Youth Collaboration Award in 1998. We're proud of the fact that

through such collaboration, the children are now enrolled and transported to school safely each day.”

### ***Motel visits***

When families move into motels, they’re typically in dire straights and need a great deal of immediate help. That’s why it’s important for you to regularly visit the motels where these families tend to reside, making sure they have what they need. Enlisting the owners and managers of the motels in your efforts can really help your process. This is a special challenge because motels are not social service agencies. Many of them see the advantage of cooperating with the schools and districts—it provides these families with access to services and resources they otherwise might not receive. Most actually feel good to be playing a part to help keep these students in school.

Victoria ISD’s KIDZconnection has a procedure in place for this. “When a family enters a motel or shelter, the project liaison is called in to meet the family,” explains Victoria’s Gail Brocklebank. “She arrives with soap, shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste, toothbrushes, and deodorant. She also takes underclothes and school supplies for all the school-age children. The first contact is the most important because it creates a rapport and puts the families at ease. Then we refer them to relevant agencies, ensure there’s adequate transportation, and help the children enroll in school—where they get all the assistance they need with homework, reading skills, and social skills.”

One year, KIDZconnection added an art class at after-school homework centers to help the motel-bound children fit into “mainstream” society and to give other students a chance to help their peers in homeless situations. The homeless liaison teaches the art class, which builds stronger bonds with the students and their families.

*When motel employees can put a name to a face, they’re more apt to call when they encounter families in need. They’re also more willing to involve you as a mediator when problems arise at the motels.*

In Victoria ISD, the teacher liaison makes an effort to educate motel proprietors about the families’ predicament. She invites them to breakfast and makes them aware of the ways in which VISD provides for the families having school-age children. Such activities are important: When motel employees can put a name to a face, they’re more apt to call when they encounter families in need. They’re also more willing to involve you as a mediator when problems arise at the motels.

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*as the shelter, the McKinney-Vento program office, and the school tried to plan for the worst-case scenario.*

*Fortunately, the father never appeared. However, the fact that the shelter called the homeless education project before it contacted the school clearly indicated the value of the relationship the project had forged with the shelter.*



## CHAPTER 6

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### **SPECIAL SITUATIONS: UNIQUE SOLUTIONS TO UNIQUE PROBLEMS**

**Three groups of students present special challenges and need targeted support:**

- Pregnant and parenting teens
- Children in domestic violence situations
- Motel-bound students

**Pregnancy and parenthood compound the problems of homelessness. Effective strategies:**

- Establish timely, effective enrollment procedures.
- Provide parenting classes, help with job placement, and flexible, appropriate educational settings.
- Offer daycare and transportation.
- Provide access to medical care.
- Set up counseling services for emotional problems.
- Offer academic motivation and support.
- Support ongoing school attendance.
- Gain shelter access.
- Help with basic needs: furniture, clothing, baby supplies.

**Minimize the negative effects of domestic violence:**

- Maintain close, ongoing contact with domestic violence shelter staff.
- Ensure security: an important consideration in terms of enrollment and withdrawal.
- Enforce emergency procedures to defuse volatile situations: for example, no photos.

**Enhance educational opportunities for students in motels:**

- Ameliorate transportation problems with extra buses, community involvement.
- Visit motels to locate the students and to foster communication.
- Establish a rapport with motel managers—they usually **want** to help!





## CHAPTER 7

### PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS: SERVING STUDENTS IN CRISIS

Students in homeless and highly mobile situations have a host of unique psychosocial needs.

More often than not, the families of children experiencing homelessness are reeling from stress. At best, they're coping with the anxiety that comes with extreme financial insecurity. At worst, they're dealing with issues like domestic violence, substance abuse, and incarceration. It is really no wonder, then, that many of our students are in need of mental health services. Most also need access to basic medical care and other services.

In this chapter, we'll explore ways to help make sure your students can obtain this critical support. You'll learn

- the importance of counselors and social workers for students experiencing homelessness;
- why district staff should understand how to address the students' special mental health issues;
- how you can help establish a comprehensive network of social and health service providers; and
- why it is important to maintain a list of available resources for regular distribution to students and their families.

### Mental Health Services: Indispensable Help

Counselors and social workers are the best resources when it comes to administering students' psychological and emotional needs. A timely referral to one of these mental health workers can make a huge difference in a child's life. In order for these professionals, along with other district staff, to be sensitive to the students' situation and better able to help, specialized training is imperative. These are the issues we explore in this section.

#### *Counselors and social workers: vital allies*

Most schools have full-time counselors and/or social workers on staff. These professionals are trained in the unique emotional and psychological problems of school-age children; some have specialized training in the needs of students experiencing homelessness. Homeless shelters, Salvation Army organizations, and similar institutions often employ counselors who are available to our students. Finally, the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation sometimes arranges services for our student population.

Regardless of where the counselors and social workers are in the district, students must have access to professionals as the need arises—quickly and efficiently.

**Cathy Requejo, Project HELP,  
Austin ISD:**

*"It's unbelievably stressful to be homeless. These kids are moving so much that it's hard for people—even people who care about them—to be involved on a regular basis. These children are just trying to survive. You can pretty much assume there might be parental neglect, simply because they're in such a crisis situation. Parents have many, many things they have to do, many confusing and time-consuming systems they have to go through. Their children's academic performance, clothing, and the like are not the first things on their minds. As for the kids themselves, they're not angry; they're shut down. They become the 'hidden kids.' When they're in my office they're either acting out or being very quiet, not saying anything. I see kids who sop up attention because they don't get that much attention from their parents. For us, if we can provide the things they don't get from their parents, like academic support, emotional support, clothing, and things like that, they'll feel they're in a more regular environment and not totally bombarded by the stress in their lives."*

**Dallas ISD:**

**A Counselor Dedicated to Students in Homeless Situations**

*Gail Goldstein is a full-time counselor who works with families and children experiencing homelessness throughout Dallas. Here are just a few of the invaluable services Gail provides:*

- Directly counsels students who are having problems
- Works with and observes children in the classroom
- Confers with teachers, giving them effective tips for helping children in crisis and transition
- Arranges for a student's transfer to another teacher or asks the principal to intervene when a teacher labels a homeless child as "a problem" or refuses to accept new ideas
- Conducts a Sensitivity/Awareness Workshop for the entire district staff with the help of homeless education colleagues

*What are the benefits of Gail's work? Students have a person they can talk with about their feelings and needs without fear of being judged. And both the students and their parents feel they're treated with dignity and respect.*

In Austin, for example, Project HELP works closely with a family therapist who is shared between the Salvation Army and the Women's and Children's Shelter; shelter-bound students are referred to this counselor on a regular basis.

*Regardless of where the counselors and social workers are in the district, students must have access to professionals as the need arises—quickly and efficiently.*

Another possibility is the solution used by Grand Prairie ISD, which employs a counselor as its homeless education liaison. This person educates both the district staff and the wider community about student needs—education that is critical in matching students with vital resources. Additionally, the LEA liaison counsels children individually when they experience academic or social problems in school. Not only are the students assured of confidentiality, they also learn effective techniques for solving problems, interacting with peers, and succeeding academically. When students need extensive counseling, they are referred to providers in the community.

***Training for district staff***

Our students have a complex array of emotional, social, and psychological needs that are not intuitively apparent to teachers, administrators, or even trained mental health professionals. That is why it's important to make sure *everyone* in your district—not just educators, but school counselors, social workers, bus drivers, secretaries, custodians, and food service workers—receives training in how to serve these students effectively.

*Make sure all the staff members in your district—not just educators, but school counselors, social workers, bus drivers, secretaries, custodians, and food service workers—receive training in how to serve these students effectively.*

***Training for counselors and social workers***

Houston's Project Su Casa provides an excellent example of how to go about training mental health workers. Every year the project offers special training sessions to educate the counselors and social workers about the special mental health issues facing students in homeless situations. Repeatedly, these professionals say the training has helped them develop effective counseling strategies for the homeless population. What's more, the project makes referrals as needed and disseminates information about mental health services and contacts to all the families and students served.

### ***Training for other staff members***

Not only do teachers need training about the unique mental health needs of our students, so do tutors and others who work with the children. Houston's Project Su Casa provides regular sensitivity training to all HISD staff. The educators are made aware of the stigmas associated with the homeless experience, and they also learn effective ways to relate to the students and their families.

In Brownsville, the homeless education program provides special training to tutors. "Tutors are trained in the special curriculum for students in transition," says Brownsville ISD liaison Diana Clive. "As a result, they dedicate at least one or two tutoring sessions every week to activities aimed at building self-esteem. New activities are integrated as new curricula become available."

### **Social Services: Tying into a Comprehensive Network**

Keeping students in school—and making sure they're successful there—is the primary requirement under the law. At the same time, families in homeless situations have many needs that are simply beyond a school's capacity to provide. That's where a wider network of social services comes in, including health care providers, employment services, and other agencies.

*Families in homeless situations have many needs that are simply beyond a school's capacity to provide. That's where a wider network of social services comes in, including health care providers, employment services, and other agencies.*

Organizing such a network is a top priority. This section explores three ways in which to accomplish this crucial task:

- Establish a network of providers.
- Arrange for providers to bring services onto the campus.
- Collect and maintain a repository of information about local service providers.

### ***Establishing a provider network***

All too often, local service providers who serve families in homeless situations do not communicate regularly. This situation can be remedied by

- connecting service providers to each other and to the local schools; and
- facilitating formal or informal meetings where providers collaborate and share information.

**Continuum of Care:**

**A Community-Wide Plan for Comprehensive Integrated Services**

**Kathy Reid, Director,  
Texas Homeless Network  
(www.thn.org):**

*"Getting everyone in the community together is a big priority of HUD, which is the source of all McKinney grants. HUD knows that liaisons and other homeless advocates work better when they're part of a long-term community-wide plan. As part of the planning process, you look at the community in terms of who's homeless and what they need. You ask, what do we already have? In Austin, for example, we have one of the best domestic violence shelters in the state. So no Continuum of Care plan would say we need another one. HUD wants cities to establish specific projects that fill needs and gaps. In Austin, which doesn't have any place except the Salvation Army for single men to stay, we might specify transitional housing for this population, or transitional housing for families. The possibilities are as varied as the communities themselves.*

*"Continuum of Care offers multiple benefits for the homeless liaison. If you're involved in the local homeless coalition, you'll know what social services are available, and you'll have relationships with the providers. Liaisons are the best resource for the homeless population; they bring a lot to the table. So they could themselves be a part of a Continuum of Care grant. We strongly encourage liaisons to find out if there's a local*

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The Galveston, Arlington, and San Antonio school districts provide good examples of how to establish an effective provider network.

***Galveston: an advisory board***

Galveston's advisory board is made up of all homeless service providers—the Galveston County Health District, the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) Family Medicine, the YMCA, Our Daily Bread, the Gulf Coast Mental Health/Mental Retardation Center, and many interested individuals. "This group meets quarterly," says Galveston liaison Kelly Romar. "We work on group projects, such as immunization clinics, and prioritize the local needs of people in Galveston who are experiencing homelessness."

***Arlington: working with the local social service providers network***

The homeless education staff in the Arlington ISD makes sure it is closely involved with the local homeless coalition, called the Social Service Providers Network (SSPN). "Many people participate in the SSPN," says liaison Betsy Foreman. "Together, we ensure the families have their basic needs met, such as housing, food, and clothing. We meet once a quarter county-wide, then once a month area-wide, which just includes Arlington. Some of the ways we've been able to help? We might find out a particular church will supply clothing, then we'll refer kids to them. At the beginning of the year they'll tell us about what places have school supplies and how students can obtain the supplies. One year we found out about a church that was willing to provide Christmas gifts for teens, and I was able to refer a couple of older kids to this program."

***San Antonio: a multi-district advisory council***

A third example is San Antonio's San Antonio Area Homeless Education Council, which, anchored by three long-standing local McKinney-Vento projects (Northeast ISD, Northside ISD, and San Antonio ISD), brings together a variety of agencies to support the students. "Fifty agencies participate," says San Antonio ISD liaison Estella Garza, "including shelter people; social service agencies providing clothing, health services, mental health, food, and an array of other services; representatives from other neighboring districts; and many businesses. We meet every two months, and on average 25 to 30 people attend the meetings. We meet at a local transitional shelter that's midway between the San Antonio, Northside, and Northeast school districts."

***Bringing services onto campus***

Schools are adept at bringing service providers together with their target population.

Consider, for example, how Grand Prairie ISD introduced health services to the district and established a community health and job fair. Before the district established these fairs, students had limited access to health care. The homeless education liaison worked closely with local community leaders to bring the

Parkland Hospital Homeless Mobile Unit to Grand Prairie to meet the needs of the students. Once a week, the mobile unit comes to a central location to give immunizations and hold a children's clinic for those who are ill.

Similarly, the Grand Prairie Community Health and Job Fair is held twice a year at a local elementary school. Here, children receive free immunizations through a collaboration of the Texas Department of Health and the Agape Health Care Clinic. Additionally, parents have a chance to find employment and meet with community service providers.

### ***Collecting and disseminating information***

Families who don't know what services are available cannot access those services. That's why it is important to make sure that your schools and LEAs serve as resources for this information.

Brownsville ISD is effective in this regard. Brownsville's homeless education program regularly distributes a resource list and makes referrals to local service providers. "Families were unaware of where to connect to social services," says liaison Diana Clive. "What's worse, many of these families had little more than the clothes on their back—so money was not available to get to social services once they were identified."

In response, the homeless education staff started identifying needs and making referrals during the initial assessment interview. The program prints pamphlets with a list of resources and phone numbers; a laminated list is made available both to parents and to agency staff. The liaison phones families to connect them with needed social services, and a referral form ensures that families are receiving the help they need from various agencies.

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*homeless coalition. If there is one, join it—and if not, start one. Also, liaisons should get involved in the community-wide planning (process to obtain a grant. This supplements available funds, and it also leverages a lot of services in the community.*

*"Homelessness is a very complex issue. People need a broad array of services—housing, educational support, and more. We need to bring all the services to families, in order to make them self-sufficient. My song and dance is: If you're by yourself you can't work. We all need to connect up and realize it's about more than simply education."*



## CHAPTER 7

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### PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS: SERVING STUDENTS IN CRISIS

**Families experiencing homelessness are reeling from stress.**

To cope with the anxiety and insecurity of their situation, families and youth must have access to a wide array of counseling, medical, and other services.

**Arrange for timely, effective mental health services:**

- Contact counselors and social workers—your most valuable allies.
- Train the district staff—teachers, counselors, social workers, secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, everyone!

**Tie into comprehensive social services networks, such as these:**

- Continuum of Care provides provides a way to get connected and make a difference.
- A provider network can be an essential component. Examples:
  - Community advisory board
  - Tri-district advisory council
- Campus-based services such as health and job fairs, free immunizations, and so on represent opportunities for contact and assistance.

**Collect and disseminate information:**

- Continually update your list of available resources.
- Make timely referrals to local service providers.





## CONCLUSION

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### A FINAL REMINDER TO THE LIAISON

No single individual in the school district holds a more pivotal role in the lives of homeless students than the LEA liaison. From ensuring that all children in the district receive the education they deserve to helping an underprivileged child receive sufficient nourishment and clothing, the liaison is the heart of the homeless education program. Helping children who struggle with the myriad obstacles of homelessness can be daunting, for the challenges families in homeless situations face are, in many ways, yours. Fortunately, with the McKinney-Vento Act as your guide, the school district as your anchor, and countless institutions and individuals as your compassionate allies, you need never feel overwhelmed. Surrounded by resources, encouraged by every student who turns adversity into success, and buoyed by every “thank you” (and there will be many—from students, parents, school personnel, community groups, law enforcement agencies, and untold others), you can expect your impact to be significant and widespread, the benefits undeniable, and the satisfaction irrefutable.

For the homeless student, your presence in the district means both stability and hope. Without your intervention, the child might never find his or her way into the classroom, might not acquire friends, have transportation to and from school and extracurricular activities, have warm clothes in the winter, supplies for doing assignments, a backpack, nourishing food, a toothbrush, even a pencil.

For the parent, you are the resource they wish they could be for their child. You offer them direction and protection at a time when they are overwhelmed by life’s challenges. You are their advocate, interpreting and upholding the laws of McKinney-Vento to see that they and their family are treated equitably and given a chance for a better tomorrow. Parents will embrace you for helping their children have lives more successful than their own, for such is the dream all parents share.

For the schools, you are the wisdom and might of the law, the magician who makes the impossible happen on a shoe-string budget, the irrepressible force who goes into the belly of the beast to save a child from harm. You champion what all teachers and administrators should: that schools are in business to educate—without respect to color, creed, or financial status. Yours is a noble vocation, and those who teach will learn much from you.

For non-homeless students, you are blind justice, balancing the scales of circumstance, opportunity, and achievement equally. The work you do to help the homeless better themselves trickles down to the non-homeless as well, and not just in your administrative duties. With every child you help place in the classroom, you cause another to consider a reality that—while not his or hers—has a lot to teach. Children have been taught to accept others, regardless of skin color or heritage; yet one who suffers poverty, hunger, ignorance, deplorable living conditions, and the hopelessness that they bring often must suffer being ostracized by society as well. Every homeless child that you help gain access into the classroom stands to learn

from his or her more fortunate classmates, and the non-homeless students will learn something valuable as well.

For you, the liaison experience just might be the most rewarding professional effort you've ever put forth. Your duties being diverse and challenging, you'll never find yourself bogged down by the drudgery of petty tasks: everything you do will be to the betterment of a young child's present and future life. You'll also discover that altruism is alive and thriving in your community as people step forward to help you help the kids. Being a liaison means working hard, knowing your business inside and out, and learning to see the silver lining in the darkest cloud. It also means reaping thanks and recognition from the schools, the parents, and the students themselves; these golden strands are woven throughout the liaison's job. You will also know the satisfaction that comes with being proud of your accomplishments and of your students and their families. More importantly, though, you will be justifiably proud of yourself.



For more information about designing an effective homeless education program, contact us.

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